

EAST OF MANSION HOUSE

EAST OF MANSION HOUSE

BY

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
1. THE DREAM OF AH LUM	I
2. THE PASH	29
3. UNCLE REUBEN	59
4. WHITE WINGS	81
5. CRASH!	119
6. A SPOT OF WATER	139
7. THE TOP OF THE STAIRS	157
8. ADVENTURE	177
9. DOW	193
10. THE PURSE	213
11. THE TABLETS OF THE HOUSE OF LI	229
12. JOHNNY	251

I—THE DREAM OF AH LUM

EAST OF MANSION HOUSE

I

THE DREAM OF AH LUM

IN the upstairs room of the Tea House of the Amber Chrysanthemum, Ah Lum was wiping the marble tables for the late afternoon service, and singing as he worked; happily without knowledge of the end to which his song would bring him.

He sang as though his heart were a bird beating its wings against the bars of its cage. He sang of his own country, of the too-much-celebrated porcelain tower and river of sincerity; and though the voice would have driven a professor of the true song into the seventh fury, the passion behind it would have set the rest of the world wondering that one man could carry such misery and live. He went from song

East of Mansion House

to song, a snatch here and a snatch there. Under the overcast sky of the London June he sang of green seas, of house and garden, of prosperous fields, of almond and cherry flower and water-lily, of radiant skies and lanterned midnights and the faint hot smell of city streets at evening, of war and wine and feasts and travails, of man's need of money, of the beauty of his fathers before him. He sang of all those material things of life from which the people of his country have made their poetry.

He sang. . . .

But if you ever knew the Tea House of the Amber Chrysanthemum, you knew Ah Lum and his noises. Even if you never ate or drank there, you must have seen it if your business led you any afternoon to the wharves and warehouses at the end of the Causeway. You might have reached West India Dock Road in good humour with yourself and the day, and, reaching it, would be conscious of a pervading disquiet; something more than the Eastern hush that hangs in the air of this quarter;

The Dream of Ah Lum

something faint and untraceable that clouded your heart and pressed upon it.

At first you might imagine that something Asiatic in your Asiatic neighbourhood was being done that should not be done; but as you walked on you would perceive that you were taking this disquiet through the ear, and that it came from the far end of the Causeway; and when you had got that far you located it as a voice of lamentation coming from a little place just below the archway. You remember it now? The little faded place, with a bead curtain to its door, and in its window a few tins of fruit and fish upon a permanent foundation of seaweed; and on the door-posts Chinese ideographs announcing its name and business, and murmuring of its excellent appointments for table games.

It was popular and prosperous. It never invited. Its door was always closed. But it did well among its own people, and the voice of Ah Lum spread news of it to casual white wanderers, who spread the news farther. They liked to think that

East of Mansion House

they only had discovered it; it permitted them the mild swagger of showing it to others, which they did as though they had invented it. Perhaps Hing Pu, its owner, knew something of the little corners of the human heart—most restaurant keepers do—and, by not inviting, held out a subtle invitation.

Once a wanderer had entered the Amber Chrysanthemum, to discover the mystery of this passion behind closed doors, and had tasted Hing Pu's fried noodles and bean-cake chop-suey, he came again with a friend, and the kitchen—and sometimes the back room—held the attention that Ah Lum had first attracted. And Ah Lum, when he wasn't serving, would sit somewhere unseen, with a guitar, and bring something of the colour of his home streets to the bleak faces of his customers.

He was the complete exile. His body was in a strange land, but his heart was set among the long fields and temples of the Middle Kingdom. Here, in this narrow street of little shops and lodging-houses, isolated from the haste and strength of the

The Dream of Ah Lum

West, he had around him whiffs and echoes of his home, and from these scraps he built his dreams. He was not remarkable to the eye. Wanderers who had been led by the voice and the place into thinking of glamour and romance and some fantastic figure of a performer, were disappointed when they saw a young man in a lounge suit and coloured tie and brown boots, serving pots of tea. The clothes did not "go" with the singing, and the set, square face did not repeat the agony of the voice. But the few who had perception noted that the long eyes held the expression of seeing something beautiful from afar.

Old Quong Lee, who kept the little store just opposite, noted it. He noted many silly things that others passed; while really important things, like the current price of tea or a week of wet weather, escaped him. He too, was an exile, but if he had any dreams, he never wailed them to the air. He had not the gift of song, but he had a more expressive gift—the gift of silence; and his physical presence behind the win-

East of Mansion House

dow of his store said Exile as firmly as the voice of his young friend. For they were friends, as philosophers and poets often are. His work done, Ah Lum would call most every night upon the old man, and talk with him of their home and of the hills where the spring is born, and they would look out upon the grey walls and the grey falling rain and sigh.

It fell frequently to Quong Lee to explain to casual customers in his shop the noises that came from the Tea House. "It iss a young man," he would say, picking his words one by one, "who singss of hiss country. He iss not happy. He want all time to go away to hiss country. He no can. He no cash. So he singss of hiss country and it makes him not-so sorrow."

And the Englishman, who couldn't understand wanting something and not going for it, would ask: "But can't he save up money, or get someone to ship him out?"

"Save-up? Huh! He have cash—plenty cash. But he play at puck-a-poo. To make more cash quick—see? All time he

The Dream of Ah Lum

play puck-a-poo. All time he never winss. So he no cash. And no friendss."

"Take him a long time to get back that way. Must be a fool—what?"

And Quong Lee would blink and tie up the purchase. Perhaps he didn't care whether Ah Lum was a fool or not; perhaps he didn't want Ah Lum to go away. Certainly the Tea House didn't, for his singing brought custom, and it was only in his song that he was miserable. In his work he was deft and clean and serious, and he spoke good English. He mixed cheerfully with his fellows, and went to the pictures and the Poplar Hippodrome and the Salvation Army with them; and for long bus-rides round London; and took his daily gamble in puck-a-poo with that zest which the workshop punter brings to the study of the early racing editions. If you had never heard him sing you would have said that he was happy; but his songs betrayed him.

Whence he came, nobody knew or was curious to ask. He had arrived among them

East of Mansion House

some ten years ago, from Cardiff, and had taken a job for a month—the job he still held; and through all that time his passion for home was at battle with his passion for gambling. Often luck had been with him for a week, and he had spoken of an increasing fund, of a few more weeks of equal prosperity, and then—home. But, growing impatient, he would take his whole store to a fan-tan room, and at the end of the evening would crawl penniless down the Causeway to the London bed where he must still rest.

But if luck did not serve him, friendship did. At least, it gave him what he had asked for, if that can be called service, though the human heart is so made that it will often cherish the dirty stone picked up in the gutter above the brightest box of marbles presented by the keeper of the bazaar. In the event, luck was, perhaps, kinder to him than friendship.

It was Fanny Freyne who did it. Fanny liked the Causeway, and bought tea and ginger and lily-root flour there, and some-

The Dream of Ah Lum

times had a meal with friends at Hing Pu's restaurant. There she met Ah Lum, and heard his singing, and laughed at it, and later heard the cause of it. They became casual distant acquaintances. Both were quiet and a little withdrawn, and while she found interest in his neat appearance and his baby smile and his forlorn condition, and liked his clear deference to herself, he saw her as a marvellous and beautiful creature who had stooped to listen to his tale.

One idle afternoon, when few customers were about, he told her the secrets of his heart. He told her of the town on the river where he belonged; how he left it when he was sixteen, and came to England with his father. How he had held always the memory of those scenes, and how, wherever he looked, they were before his eyes. He told her of the coming day for which he lived, when he would go back there, and buy a waterside farm, and take an agreeable wife who would give him many splendid sons. He told her of the place he would occupy there among the

East of Mansion House

serious and dignified people of his own province.

And Fanny, interested, as all women are, in being taken into the confidence of a young man—even a yellow young man—thought about it all and wanted to help him. Not that the sorrows of a lowly Chink were any business of hers, or that she could, without drawing unpleasant talk upon herself, do anything for him: it wouldn't have been quite the thing. A Chink, she had been taught, may be all right, but he's still a Chink; just as an Englishman may be all wrong, but is still an Englishman. There was no getting away from the fact. But she had no worries of her own, so it pleased her to dally with a chance of missionary meddling with other people's affairs, and of pushing the poor benighted creature towards his heart's desire.

So she spoke to her father about it, and he told her that there were societies for that sort of thing—getting poor people home to their own countries—and he'd speak

The Dream of Ah Lum

to his boss about it. His boss heard the story, which Fanny's father dressed up with some humour, and said he'd see what he could do about it. He went himself to the Causeway, and got an hour's British amusement from the nasal howling of Ah Lum; and in his turn, touched with the fever of doing something for somebody, he spoke to a man higher up.

The man higher up went to see the theatrical exile, and the tale of Ah Lum and his songs made a few chuckles in a dull club smoking-room and lightened the atmosphere of a dull dinner-table. Half a dozen of them made a pilgrimage to the restaurant of Hing Pu; and as the Englishman is always most ready to help when he's being amused, it wasn't long before the tale got higher still, and somebody up there said he reckoned they could work it for the fellow somehow.

So they did. Fanny Freyne had been a better missionary than she knew. From her idle interest, Ah Lum's sorrow became not only known and popular beyond his narrow Causeway: it became a matter of

East of Mansion House

competition among energetic idlers. It's wonderful how many people you can interest in giving time and service to a cause if you don't ask them to give it. Ah Lum would never have been sent to the home of peace and colour for which he longed if he had gone about begging people to help him. He didn't beg. Unknowingly, he borrowed the successful methods of the publicity agents, and made a song about it, and a joke of himself. His guitar and his voice did what the most necessitous and pathetic "case" could never do.

Within two months of Fanny's first word, she arrived one afternoon at Hing Pu's place in a mild excitement; and when Ah Lum had served her with tea, she told him she had news for him.

"I been working for you. It's taken a long time, but I done it. Guess what I done?"

Ah Lum smiled and said nothing.

"You know all them swells that been coming down here lately? Well, I worked that. Now, suppose—suppose you was

The Dream of Ah Lum

sailing for China next week. Eh? Out of all this fog and slush. To China. Eh?"

Ah Lum made a long noise like *ai-eee*, and into his eyes came the far-away look.

"All those flowers you told me about. And sunshine every day. And all the old places that you haven't seen for years. Eh? How'd it be?"

Ai-eee! He looked through the window into the Causeway and its tiny shops, and into the window of Quong Lee's store, and up at the sky that held the hue of a wrung dish-cloth. "What iss the good? I never get to China. Never. *Ai-eee!*"

"That's where you're wrong, son, wrong. You will get there. Listen. You're going to China next week. Understand? I've worked it. I been telling people about you—them people what have been down here to see you. High-up people. And there's papers coming to-morrow—government papers that'll take you right home wherever you want to go. They'll come to-morrow. And me or somebody else'll

East of Mansion House

bring 'em. And next Wednesday you'll be on the boat going home. How's that, now? Eh? That make you happy—eh?"

"Happy"? For a moment it seemed that he had not followed her words, or was still translating them. Then he folded his hands and beamed, and spoke his thanks. "Oh, yess. O-oh, yess. But—is it true? Really true that I go to China? You are making a joke? After so many years . . . it does not seem true."

"No, really. Honest. I've fixed it. I have really."

"Oh, miss, you are too good! It is wonderful. To be really going to China at last. It iss . . ." He turned his face away and unclasped his hands.

"There'll be nothing for you to pay. Those papers'll take you just where you want to go. Next Wednesday, it'll be."

"Oh, miss, you are so good to a nobody! But why me?—there are so many who would like to go back to China."

"Just because you're you, I suppose. They liked your songs, those fellers. And they'er

The Dream of Ah Lum

high-up people. You can reckon it as all settled."

"O-oh, miss! It iss . . . *Ai-eee!*" and he finished his thanks in a bubble of Cantonese.

His face held nothing of his inward emotion; only the eyes looked steadily beyond the window as though lifted towards hills and hot skies, while the liquid syllables poured out of him like an offering of wine before the temple. What he was saying Fanny didn't know, but she was satisfied. Her surprise had come off, and she had made him happy. The smile that he wore about his daily work, the smile that hid the hunger of his heart, was gone; one does not smile in supreme happiness. In its place was the expression of the lover who sees his love approaching within his reach, while hardly believing that it is truly she.

"You are so good, miss, to take this trouble of me. Shall I sing some song?"

Fanny smiled back at him. There was nobody but themselves in the upstairs room,

East of Mansion House

and it was pleasant to have him make a noise for her alone. He took his guitar and leaned against a table and sang a wilder song than any she had heard him sing; at once a pæan and a wail, as of wanderers returning from peril and encounter; and he swayed his body and sang as though possessed of the soul of all who come home after long years. It thrilled her to know that she had been able, by the simple act of "speaking" for him, to move him to this intensity.

She hoped nothing would go wrong with the arrangements. It would be awful if, somehow, those papers didn't come, after she had moved him like this. Under the thrill she had a sudden fear that perhaps after all they wouldn't come, and with it a picture of Ah Lum when she broke the news to him. He might do something dreadful; you never knew with these foreigners. Or perhaps at the last moment the boat wouldn't be able to take him. Or the papers might not be in order. Or the ship might be wrecked on the way out. But

The Dream of Ah Lum

it was certain they would come, and everything would be all right, because dad's boss's friend had had a letter from some office saying they were coming. Oh, they were sure to come!

And then the superlative noise that Ah Lum was making brought people to the tea-room to inquire the cause of it; and he became swiftly quiet and closed his lips and went about his duties, ignoring all facetious questions. Fanny went out, still wondering what he'd do if it happened that she had promised him heaven and couldn't deliver it.

She did deliver it. The papers came, brought by three of the people concerned in the business who hadn't yet seen the quaint creature whom they had befriended. The quaint creature behaved with becoming quaintness. Hing Pu bowed them upstairs, and then produced Ah Lum and offered him as though he were a dish from the kitchen. Ah Lum folded his hands and bowed, and the high-up friend, who was known and distantly respected for his

East of Mansion House

after-dinner speeches, made a five-minute delivery in that vein, though its fine flavour escaped half his audience. Then he handed over the papers, with minutn instructions about the boat's sailing day and its berth at Tilbury, and these were repeated by a young man who had spent some time in the East. As they were handed over, Hing Pu put his hand on them.

"There iss no money in here, sir?"

"Money? No—why? Only passes."

"It iss not safe to give him money. He play with it and lose it."

"Oh! Well, he might trade those passes. Here—we'll keep these till Wednesday. We'll bring 'em down Wednesday—or get Mr. Hickson to keep them for him. That'll be best—eh?"

Ah Lum made no comment. He accepted his own weakness and bowed. He did not burst into profuse thanks for their kindness. He said they were too kind, but his face expressed nothing and seemed to hide no more than the face of a statue. He might have been acknowledging the

The Dream of Ah Lum

loan of the evening paper. But Fanny knew better. She knew what simple, hot emotions were crowding and beating behind that mask. The long look in the eyes that met hers reported things too deep for words or gestures. He was going home. At last he was going home. . . .

That evening the news was all round the quarter, and there were feasts and invitations to feasts. Hing Pu gave one with Ah Lum as the guest of honour. The owner of the house where Ah Lum mostly played puck-a-poo gave one. The place at the corner of Pennyfields gave one. For five days Ah Lum was the centre of many tables, and the subject of all gossip.

Always there were comings and goings in these two streets; men who stayed a month and departed, and came back next year and departed again, while Quong Lee and Hing Pu and the other shopkeepers sat steady year by year. But the one man who most yearned to depart had never had the chance; he could not pay his passage, and was incompetent to work his pas-

East of Mansion House

sage. Now, after many years, his hope had been achieved; and those who had heard everlastingly of the river farm among the hills, and whose afternoon sleep had been worried by that wailing, were perhaps glad to know that they had heard the end of it.

Certainly they came forward with ceremonies of departure more fitting to an honoured guest than to one of themselves; they seemed to be celebrating something more than Ah Lum's happiness; but he was too enfolded in his fortune to perceive anything in their attentions but honest congratulations. Already he seemed withdrawn from Limehouse and Poplar, already half-way towards China; no longer a feature of the Causeway, but a loiterer who could not be taken into the common run of things; who could only be entertained. He even stood out of the games of puck-a-poo; and though Hing Pu advanced him a week's money, he seemed to lose interest in the tables, and played only a game or two.

Right up to the Wednesday evening

The Dream of Ah Lum

when he was to take the train to Tilbury they crowded him with feasts. Then in the hour of his departure they turned out to send him off, and the Causeway was astir with olive faces and babbling tongues. The doorway to the Tea House was impassable. Fanny was there, and her father; and the high-up friend, who had nothing better to do that evening, had brought three new friends from the West to see this curious corner they had heard so much about.

In the light mist of the Causeway, before the shuttered shops, they moved, without noise, back and forth, as one. Trains grumbled across the arch at the end. A cart came through, driving a wedge into the crowd. Quong Lee, wearing still the robes of the monarchy, sat in his window staring at nothing. Somebody unseen started to wail one of Ah Lum's songs, mimicking his noise. There was a smell of dust and sandalwood; the smell of Ah Lum's home.

Then the hero appeared at the bottom of the steps leading from the tea-room. He was dressed for his journey in a thick ulster

East of Mansion House

and cloth cap, and trousers that were a little too long for him. He carried his belongings in a little blue sack that dangled from his arm. Behind him came Hing Pu. At the door they turned to each other, and nodded a casual farewell. Ah Lum looked at the crowd with vacant eye, and then at the shops and the roofs, giving them, too, farewell. The high-up friend who had brought the papers came forward with them.

Ah Lum gave him a bow and one of his wide slow smiles, and said: "It iss very kind of you. T-hank you." He took the papers and put them in his pocket. "If you escusse me, I will take just a minute to say good-bye to my friend over there." He nodded towards Quong Lee's, pushed through the crowd, giving a word here and there, and entered the shop.

The crowd turned again to talk among itself, and Fanny and her dad showed the new gentlemen the inside of the Tea House, and of one or two of the shops on the other side, and expounded commonplaces which

The Dream of Ah Lum

were mysteries to them. Then the high-up friend looked at his watch and said:

"Look here, he'll never get that train if he don't hurry. Fetch him out. I say—tell him, somebody."

Fanny's father struggled into Quong Lee's shop and found Quong Lee at the counter. Ah Lum was not there.

"Where is he? He'll lose the train if he ain't careful. What's he up to? He ain't gone playing fan-tan, has he, the fool?"

Quong Lee turned to his inner door. "He hass gone into there."

"What for? Call him out. He's only got a minute or two."

"I will see." Quong Lee moved from his stool and floated into the back room. Then he called over his shoulder: "He iss still heah."

"What's he up to?"

"Come and see."

The three gentlemen and Fanny were now in the shop, and they pressed forward, wondering what they were to come and see. Over each other's shoulders they saw Ah

East of Mansion House

Lum flat on the floor. And, sticking up from his middle, like an arresting finger, they saw the shining haft of a kris. Quong Lee stooped over him and got up quickly.

"He iss dead."

Five people said "Dead?"

"Uh-huh."

Five people began sentences that were never finished.

"But what——"

"Why should——"

"What on earth——"

"Who on earth——"

"What the devil——"

They all turned to Quong Lee then; and the high-up friend got a clear question out.

"But what on earth *for*? After we've done all this for him. What *for*?"

"It wass you gentlemen."

"Us?"

"Huh. He hass told me. You were too kind."

"Told you what? Too kind? How? Gone to all this trouble over him to get him home. And then . . . I don't understand it."

The Dream of Ah Lum

"It iss simple. He got no home. He never seen China. Not know China. Not want to know China. He wass born here—in Step-nee. He love England. He love London. And when he know you send him to foreign country—to China—where he got no friend, no home, and not know their ways—he go afraid. He try to run away, but got no place to go. He 'fraid you find him. He cannot go China. He no can. So he die."

"But confound it—he was always wanting to go back. He said so. Always singing about it, they said. Always unhappy because he couldn't go home."

"Always veh happy here."

"Well, I'm hanged! Then all these songs and that—all this talk about his home and his farm and China—all nothing, eh?"

"Yess—no. He veh happy here, but he like to be same as others, and be sad because he iss far away from his own country."

"I see. He was just a humbug, then?"

Quong Lee blinked. "No, mister. He wass a poet."

II—THE PASH

II

THE PASH

IT was certain that Amy Rainbird had a "pash" for Miss Englefield, the Welfare Officer. Susie Witchett had said so, and Susie saw not only what went on under her nose, but far beyond it. It was a long nose.

It beat her, though, what anybody could see in that Old Thing to rave about; and when little Amy discovered admirable traits in her, and began to rave, Susie looked at her with lowered eyes and chipped her. Susie couldn't understand it, and what she couldn't understand she condemned. Why couldn't Amy be ordinary, and come out Sunday nights upon the hills, and have some fun with the boys, instead of always hanging round Miss Englefield?

East of Mansion House

But Amy had no eye for the boys, and no ear for Susie's mutterings.

It was knocking-off time, Saturday afternoon, and at the first howl of the hooter the gates of the Clutterfield factories came to life. Flour-faced men and women came from the limestone works. Boys and girls came spectrally from the kilns. Black-faced men, raddled with sweat, came from the furnaces. Young girls, with yellow skins, came from the filling-shed, moving like live things. Smoke from the bottle-necked chimneys wavered and curled among them in changing hues of saffron and olive. They hobbled on clogs or in father's boots, bickering. Their cheeks were harsh, their eyes shrewish, their hands chilblained. The soap advertisements on the walls that exhorted them to Keep 'That Schoolgirl Complexion were both inept and unkind.

In ones and twos they broke ranks and passed into the side-streets. At the doorways, flanked by the week's washing, children shrilled adenoidally and fought, finding

The Pash

in black mud the only brightness of their kingdom; and from knocker to knocker went the tallyman.

No place for pashes. But Amy Rainbird went through it undismayed. She was not beautiful, but she had youth and ardour, and her statuette figure moved through that crowd with something of the quality of a lantern in a mist. She was noticeable, and she had been noticed. She walked upright. Copper curls dressed her white face; keen eyes lent character to the slack mouth. The more volatile of the men, shaken out of their trolloping by her April ardour, spoke of her as a Nice Bit; she didn't know it, though. She had, as I say, no eye for the men; she had seen too much of them and their ways in home and factory. Assuming that all men were like the men she knew, she turned from their proffered attentions in disgust, and went steadily through them, and crossed to the opposite kerb, and stood looking right and left hungrily. Then, at the sight of a tall, gaunt woman, her face lit up; her step took buoyancy; and she sped

East of Mansion House

towards her like a child to a garden. The woman received her with an attitude of ownership, looking down at her with a tolerance that was almost mocking; and Amy was grateful for even this tolerance. To her, Miriam Englefield was not only the most wonderful thing in Clutterfield; she was the most wonderful thing in the world. She was rapture and adventure. Where others saw a tall woman with long face, aimless hands, tight mouth, and drooping eyes that stared always beyond, she saw a goddess. She saw what she sought. The blackest earth will throw up its flower; no corner is too dark to hide the silver sixpence from sharp eyes.

Miriam was her silver sixpence. Her early years had been steeped in smoke and ringed by uncomely spectacles; and she was at that age when girls of her class and temperament want what they call Life. She wanted blithe frocks and company; full contact with the world; Good Times; trips to London. She had no claim by merit or indulgence upon these things; she was set

The Pash

fitly in her station; but she wanted them and fretted for them, and at last, when her employers gave her a Welfare Worker, she found them. Against the dumpling minds of the people about her, the competence and self-sufficiency of Miriam Englefield shone and rang with refreshment for the heart and stimulus for the eye. So she turned to what she saw of beauty, and Susie's irony was toothless.

Miriam? Well, Susie had labelled Miriam, in her first week, a Bit of a Mystery. And Susie was right. She was a mystery to herself and to others. She was hard and cold; as hard as diamonds and with something of their tepid lustre; a good worker on her job, but giving nothing beyond the job's requirements; finding nothing in the world that could move her from her state of shuttered calm, nor believing that the world held anything for her of delight or dismay. The other girls couldn't get near her; she wore icicles. But Amy . . . Somehow the cow-eyed worship of this child *had* moved her. Against her will,

East of Mansion House

she began to notice her, and to find something piquant in the pallor and the orange curls and the hungry face that one look or word of hers could feed. To her, as to Amy, Clutterfield was unkind. They met at a moment when both (one actively, the other unconsciously) were resentful of the smoke and the corroding round of the factory. By ironic chance, their tired eyes fell upon each other, and the thing played itself out as Susie said it would.

Arms linked, they went together down the Stewpony Road; the child of fourteen and the woman of forty, Amy looking up with worship, Miriam looking down with the casual approval of leader to follower. At the car terminus they halted. Amy's road lay the other way, but always, when permitted, she walked with Miriam to the car, and lingered until she was dismissed. This afternoon the car was waiting; and as she turned regretfully to leave her idol she looked up to her and murmured: "Good-bye, Miss Englefield." Then, shyly frivolous: "Happy dreams!"

The Pash

Miriam gave her one of her white smiles. "You funny little friend! That's what your name means, you know. Amy—little friend. Would you like to be my little friend?"

"Oo—miss!" Paradise opened in her face.

"Call me Miriam if you like, child. That is, when we're not in the factory."

"Oo—Miriam! May I?"

An appraising look from Miriam. "What a funny baby you are! Would you like to come to tea with me to-morrow? You know my rooms? Branksome Street. Number Fifteen."

Amy slid home on the wind. The joy of looking at her beloved, and worshipping from a distance, was now crowned. The gate was opened. This shining creature had stooped and chosen her from other and better people as alone worth notice; had accepted her worship and was rewarding it with the glory of her actual presence. Her store of love had now a direction and a haven. Miriam wanted her. She made images of adventure and sent them floating

East of Mansion House

along the pavement. Against the tormented horizons of Clutterfield she threw up bright dreams centring on Miriam, and saw Miriam as a spreading flower luminous in a midnight garden. She imagined herself rich, and bringing gifts to Miriam; thoughtful gifts; she imagined long talks with Miriam; saw herself saving Miriam from many complex deaths; being praised by Miriam and rebuked by Miriam. At home that night she took from her box a cluster of wax cherries that had fallen one day from Miriam's hat in the cloak-room; and timidly, daringly, she kissed them, and dreamed of to-morrow.

And on that Sunday afternoon she knew six hours of bliss. Six hours in that luminous garden. Six avalanches of confession and devout attention to Miriam's lightest word. Six hours of looking into that wonderful face, and sitting in that room of which every chair, every vase, every picture, every cushion, was Miriam. And under the adoring eyes Miriam sat thinking: "Little Fool! Little Fool!"

The Pash

Yet . . . in those six hours Miriam was conscious of a change. Something in the March beauty of this child, and her morning mind and profuse devotion, seized upon her and swayed her; brought back to her the unbusiness-like perfume of the Spring. She forgot herself and her self-sufficiency and her reserve. The Little Fool was so fresh, so much on tip-toe; so much in need of some star to follow, and so sure that Miriam was that star. There she sat, placing her heart for Miriam to pick up or kick aside.

Miriam picked it up.

All very well if it had stopped at that. But it didn't. After years of solitude, the sense of possession was inspiring. She began to take Amy in hand, and went on to improve her speech and her manners and her dress. She lent her magazines and novelettes, and books of poetry by the easier poets, and sent her in for a course in the Pallas School of Memory Training and Efficiency. And when Amy bowed humbly to all reproof and exhortation, though she

East of Mansion House

thought "Little Fool!" the thought was tempered; and she found that, having done so much for the child, she must do more. Soon they were always together, and Miriam felt herself drifting; being led by the child instead of leading; and at last there came an evening when the thing was out of her hands, and she found herself giving secret for secret, confidence for confidence.

She had been fitting Amy with a new frock, and they had been talking at random into the air; talking as they would not have talked if facing each other in idleness. The task gave their talk a careless tempo. When the fitting was done, they were still silent, and sat down by the fire, Amy saucer-eyed and meek; Miriam veiled. Then, by chance, each turned secretly to look at the other. Their eyes met, and for some seconds they held each other, telegraphing. Amy broke the spell.

With a queer gurgle she flung herself from the chair towards Miriam, and knelt before her with "Oh, Miriam! Oh,

The Pash

Miriam!" chanting the words. "You won't ever let's part, will you? Ever? It'd be awful without you." And Miriam, speaking from outside herself, cried, "Amy! Oh, Amy . . ." and a great spiritual peace enfolded them.

Well, that night the Pash was proclaimed. There was no more patronage of innocence by experience; no more welfare inspector and factory-hand. That night Miriam knew that she was beyond the reach of reason; that Amy was her world, that she would live for Amy; dream of Amy. She had descended from her heights, to snatch at an old dream, and she knew that she would never get back. But she was content; and all that evening she talked and gave her heart away; and in the morning, though she remembered what she had done, and all that it implied, she was not dismayed. She knew that she rejoiced in the idea of Amy as Amy rejoiced in the idea of her.

All through that summer this bond—limp as milk, active as jelly—held them.

East of Mansion House

Evening walks and Sunday teas became fixtures; every parting at night was a heart-ache. Every Saturday they took train to Brundle, and had tea there; and paraded the Wide Walk with the young pride of the town; and Susie Witchett became pungent in mockeries and comments. But the armour of their grave friendship blunted all her shafts; and at last even she could see that this was of finer cast than the friendships she knew. The factory day became for each of them a necklace of adventure, to be told bead by bead. There were encounters in the corridors—smiles—slippings of notes—flowers for Miriam's table—long walks at night, hand in hand under crimson skies and above valleys that were whirlpools of smoke and glittering windows and flame. Amy's pale face began to wear a bloom; her clear eyes radiated tranquil delight. All life seemed to lie in the drowsy perfume of lavender that came from Miriam's dress. The morning weather was set by Miriam's mood, and she sobbed in her prayers at night for the gift of Miriam's friendship.

The Pash

But her worship did more than she knew. She brought a battery to a sluggish pulse, and under its touch the pulse stirred and drummed. Her friendship was April; Miriam's was Indian summer. Amy was resilient; Miriam rigid; and Miriam began to hold her in bondage. This was no more a Little Fool, but a treasure to be hoarded. When other girls talked to Amy, or tried to draw her into their parties, she became peremptory. If any boy passed a salutation her eyes went hard; she fumed and fidgeted. Amy's friendship was flame and flash; it had brought something at once vital and restful into her days. At last she found what she had never dared hope for—a friend whose mind moved with hers, and who shared her own conception of the care and constancy implied in the perfect friendship; and, at the mere thought of losing that wild-flower beauty, she knew fury and dismay. New forces, new passions, from which her level life had protected her, now began to grow. She, who had been indifferent to all affection, now knew that she had surren-

East of Mansion House

dered all hope of peace to the whims of a child.

She began to be bitterly afraid, and to wonder—How long will it last? Will it . . . ? If it . . . Oh, my God!

• • • •

Nature and Billy Fishpool answered her.

One evening, after work, the Little Fool came to Branksome Street babbling and singing of a boy.

"Comes from Liverpool, Miriam . . . William Fishpool his name is, but everybody calls him Billy. . . . You know him, I expect . . . He's in the filling-shed t'other—I mean, the other side of the yard. . . . Boy with dark curly hair . . . Always laughing. . . . He's asked me to go to the pictures with him. He says I've got the prettiest eyes in Clutterfield. . . . He looks awfully smart when he's got his best things on, but I like him best when he's working in the yard. . . . He ain't half—I mean, he's awfully strong. . . . I see him

The Pash

—I mean, I saw him lift one of the spudgers in the yard and hold it out straight for nearly a minute. . . . He smokes a pipe. . . . He says he likes the way I do my hair. . . . He says . . .”

You know the sort of thing. Miriam, tight-lipped, listened without comment. Once or twice she turned the talk to other matters, but, strangely, all topics impinged at some point or other on Billy Fishpool. At last she dismissed Amy, curtly, and noted that Amy went, not, as at other times, grieved at being shut out of paradise, but brightly, as though to some secret storehouse.

When she was gone, Miriam sat rigid for an hour, staring into the fire and twisting her limp hands. It had come. She had lost her. And not only that. Amy had made her a gift of her love to play with, and she had thought to amuse herself with it, to ease her mind with borrowings from its fresh ripple. But now . . . now it was she who had given her heart into childish hands that would tear it to pieces. She felt

East of Mansion House

suddenly as though she were on a rocking boat.

For two evenings that week Amy was missing. On the Wednesday she came as usual, her eyes bright and set. She said nothing of boys, but sat in her customary place at Miriam's feet, resting her face on Miriam's knees, and glowing with subdued colour, as through a bridal veil. Miriam had to prompt her. Then it came in a cascade, bubbling and falling and

It was only stopped by the sight of Miriam's long white face and twisting fingers.

"Why—Miriam, dear—what's the matter? Whatever's the matter?"

There was a scene; a flood of sobs and phrases; a struggle. Before Amy knew what the trouble was, they were quarrelling. Like most quiet people they started suddenly on the topmost note. They stormed at each other. Their tones creaked. Miriam was like a cat when a bird is taken from it. She turned on Amy a flame of fury. She wept and pleaded. She took the child

The Pash

by the shoulders and shook her. Her face had the hue of red cabbage.

"Amy! Amy! He can't have you.

"He can't! I won't have it. I won't have you going with boys.

"You're mine! You belong to me. Not a silly clod like him. Have you forgotten——!

"Amy—you can't go. You can't leave me. You're the only thing I've got. The only thing I ever loved. *Amy!*"

Her voice went suddenly bleak; then failed. She knelt to Amy with begging hands and whispered: "You're mine, dear. You know you are. Nobody else can have you."

But Amy couldn't see it. Something had happened that had changed her from a Little Fool, and she stared back at Miriam's antics. As though she were seeing her for the first time, and seeing her suddenly as something small. And when Miriam shook her, and put a tight arm round her neck, and almost wrestled with her, Amy was indignant. She broke free and moved

East of Mansion House

round the table. It seemed that in three days she had achieved competency and self-sufficiency.

"Miriam!" The tones registered surprise and pain. "Whatever's up wi' you, Miriam? What you mean gittin' 'old o' me like that? What you mean—you won't have it? Who are you to say that? I'm not under your orders."

Miriam was gulping. "Mean? What do I mean? You . . . you . . . You—coming here and pretending and—and—and getting what you can—and then—then, when you're tired—you—you leave me for some guttersnipe from the yard. And—and——" She became operatic. "And after all you've said to me. Here. In this room. At nights. All the things you said. About us always being together. The way you came with your sawniness—and—and your innocence and—and—— All lies, I suppose it was. Eh? Lies! Just to get what you could out of me. Eh?" She ended on a muffled scream. "You—beast!"

But love had come to Amy, and she

The Pash

hardly followed the outburst. Her worship of Miriam seemed now nothing but a moment's enthusiasm; something behind her that neither of them could be expected to take seriously.

"Why, Miriam . . . Why, I never thought you'd be like this about it . . . Here—don't be silly. Talking like that. Anybody'd think you owned me. That was just my silly-kid ways. Sloppiness. All that poetry and stuff. You don't know what love is. I didn't until now. You didn't ought to 'ave let me talk like that."

"Let? Let? You—you little back-street kid—come to me like you came, and—How was I to know you were pretending? Oh, you little fool. Haven't I got a right? Haven't I made you what you are? Taught you to speak properly. Taught you to dress. Taught you to behave. And now—oh!"

She collapsed, then, and moaned; and at that Amy went to her, and put a hand that was meant to be kind, but was patronising, on her shoulder. "Miriam. I say—Miriam. Here. . . . We shall always be friends."

East of Mansion House

She calmed a little. She saw a last chance. She took Amy's hand and pressed it. She said she was sorry for what had just happened. She was all worked up, because Amy's friendship meant so much to her. She asked Amy to forget it, and Amy gave her a return squeeze, and sat again at her feet, ready to talk sensibly about Billy. She didn't understand this upheaval, and she really couldn't bother to try. There were more important things.

Miriam, cunning, let her talk. And as the room became dusky and intimate, she dropped words upon Amy. She kept herself out of it, and moralised. Her Little Fool had brought her the tidings of first love; and all that evening, through the twilight, she curdled it with doubt and diffidence. She gathered back the reserve she had lately scattered, and became her old self.

"You see, child, he's a man. Men are different. They don't feel as we do. Love doesn't last with them. They soon get used to it. Make it part of every day, and then

The Pash

. . . But as long as you're happy I shan't mind. I expect Billy's different from other men—not such a brute. If he loves you, you'll enjoy washing his clothes and getting his dinner and cleaning the house, and you won't want all the other things. If you can only be sure he's different. . . .”

“Oh, he is, Miriam. He is.” Within an hour Amy was once again under the influence, and the evening ended in calm and the old domination. Miriam thought she had won.

But that evening was their last. Next morning, in the cold air of October, Billy stepped again into Amy's heart, and she was filled with self-contempt. Looking back at that muggy friendship and the silly secrets, she felt as though she had fallen into a weedy pond; she wanted to wipe out all memory of it; and when that night she met Billy, and told him of the outburst, and heard his comments on it, his lucid passion cleansed and calmed her. After Miriam, he was as commonplace and sweet as running water.

But Miriam was not plastic. She had no

East of Mansion House

running water to cleanse and calm her; only herself and her thoughts for company; and after meeting Amy and Billy in the street, and receiving turned heads, she knew that she was alone again. It hadn't mattered before, but now something was gone from her and Amy had taken it. Days began to stretch before her like deserts—deserts that had once been green; and Amy loomed in them, and her shadow covered them. She could not turn to novels or poetry or to the streets or to the pictures. Her mind was set wholly upon an adoring and adorable Little Fool; upon the sound of her step on the stairs; upon the warmth of her pale face as she moved chattering about the room, or stood, poised and vibrant in mignon beauty, by the fireplace. The fire was out; but she would still stare at its ghost, and stretch her hands to the cold bars.

She took to wandering about the outskirts of Clutterfield, early and late. On the hills above the valley of flame and smoke, where she had perversely found beauty, she sought

The Pash

now for comfort and inspiration; and in the fantasia of slag-heaps and gasping furnaces she pretended to find symbols of her own state. Even at midnight, when the town's voice was hushed, the valley had not the peace of a village or the suspense of a great city, but lay petulant, waving red tongues, a venomous animal cowed. Like herself.

That guttersnipe. To come between her and her beauty, putting his great hands on her treasure, and claiming it for his own. To take the sensitive plant she had tended so delicately, and set it in coarse ground and fertilize it with worldly knowledge. To soil that grace and purity with his harsh humour. To kiss those orange curls. To poison her against her best friend. Somewhere about the town he would be walking with Amy; and she knew that her own confidences were now doormats for the feet of the boy and girl. And through the nights she lay awake fuming, and called: "Amy! Oh, Amy—you're mine—you're mine!"

But in the factory she took trouble to

East of Mansion House

avoid her. Once or twice, in yard or corridor, they met, and Amy gave her glances that were on the edge of mockery; and other girls noted, and Susie said, that she looked at Amy as though she would like to stab her. From this thought she drew some solace, and comforted the lonely nights with fancies of Amy returning to her, penitent, and of a new blooming of their friendship.

It couldn't go on like this, though. Somehow she must get her back, or something must happen to end it. She couldn't drag through days and days this clotted longing and despair. And all through that Little Fool. To think that all this misery and self-hatred and horror could be lifted by one movement from a silly factory girl. A life at the mercy of a kid. Somehow it must be snapped short and sharp. Only the faith that something would happen to end it sustained her under its burden. She created the fancy of their dying together. Of compelling Amy to go with her to the sea, for a last Sunday, and there taking her

The Pash

with her into the water. Like the poem they'd read together. "She's mine. She must come back. She must."



But she didn't. These things seldom round themselves off like poems.

It was late afternoon in November when the end came. The explosion began in the mixing-shed. There was no warning; no first flash or single detonation, but one boom that shook buildings within a mile and broke windows within many miles; and the shed went up. In a few seconds the air was filled with dust and chipped glass and stones and splinters of steel. The ground was littered with broken men. Three seconds later, many bells rang—alarm-bells, fire-bells, dinner-bells, hooters. From other sheds the workpeople came in clusters. About them moved agitated foremen seeking to hold them in order, calling for positions of fire-drill, and crying: "Safety Shelters! Safety Shelters!"

But rules were forgotten; were, indeed,

East of Mansion House

useless; for, following the great explosion came a wind—a whirr—a flash—a fugue of falling bricks—and darkness covered the laboratory and the power-plant. Random cartridges fired themselves among the crowd. Through the dark, streaked by fire, moved terrible figures, stumbling and falling.

At the first boom, Miriam, they say, went from her office to attend the girls, with the steady step of one who knew her job and was going to do it. In the first shed there were no girls to attend; only a mass of twisted steel and still forms. She went to the second—empty; to the third—that, too, was empty.

In the uncertain light she stood still, peering about her.

She was last seen by Susie Witchett who made picturesque remarks about the sort of figure she cut standing there in that light among those things, and staring as though she was looking for somebody.

And Susie says that, while Miriam was standing there, a little girl came round

The Pash

a corner babbling, and fell upon her and kept crying, "Oh, Miriam—save me, save me. Oh, Miriam!" And that while Miriam was holding the girl in her arms and kissing her, a young fellow came up, and got hold of the girl, and pulled her away; and Miriam pulled her back, and the girl held on to her, taking no notice of the boy, and only whimpering "Miriam—oh, Miriam!" And she heard the boy shout, "Let 'er go, damn you. She's my girl. Let 'er go!" But the girl went on saying: "Miriam—I wanta die with Miriam. Oh, Miriam!"

And then, she says, the young chap went for Miriam, as though she were a man. Went straight at her, and they wrestled, and at last he got hold of the girl, and got Miriam down, and picked the girl up, and ran. And Susie ran too. Only just in time. For twenty seconds later there was a red flare and a bang; and where they'd been wrestling there was nothing.

Next morning Susie wanted to know all about it. "How did Miss Englefield come

East of Mansion House

to be killed right outside the safety-shed? Why didn't she go inside? What was she waiting for? What was you all fighting about?"

But Amy Rainbird was suddenly grown-up and reserved. "How should I know? Lorst her nerve, I s'pose. She was a bit loopy, really, when you got to know her. Billy Fishpool says——"

III—UNCLE REUBEN

III

UNCLE REUBEN

OLD Reuben Housego stood in the Victoria Square of Stewpony Heath, and nodded at it and chuckled. It was a deep throaty chuckle; a chuckle not of amusement or good-humour, but of intense self-satisfaction. A chuckle that marked Uncle Reuben as a man who lived in love and charity with all men, and found Stewpony Heath a fair prize-packet. He rubbed his hands. His shoulders shook. Across his grizzled face flitted dry smiles. He had the air of the happy schemer. He seemed to nudge invisible comrades to share the joke. He mumbled to himself:

“Jes’ about the same. Might a-bin yes’-day. Woolingford chimney still there. Scollick’s kilns still there. Cleemput’s little shop

East of Mansion House

still there—knew 'e'd never get on. Well, well . . . Wonder what they'll say. . . ."

They are rare spirits whom Stewpony Heath can move to chuckles. It neither charms nor shocks. It has no grace and no fine flaunt of ugliness. Its sable bulk and bald outlines are as gloomy and bitter as spent tea-leaves. From the Victoria Square, side-streets open upon vistas of malicious deformity—companies of chimneys, many-coloured smoke-shapes, leaping furnaces and enormities of engines.

But Uncle Reuben had secret alliance with it. It was a setting for delicious adventure. Time, place and weather were in perfect accord with his mood and occasion—Saturday evening, keen air, streets glittering after cold rain.

He was glad that it was about the same—just as dirty, just as dim, just as indecisive. Nothing had been quite achieved. No street was quite what it was meant to be. No architectural schemes quite came off. The imposing Town Hall did not quite impose. The black statue of a Mayor of the 'sixties

Uncle Reuben

fell many points short of civic dignity. But he liked it so. He found something heart-some in its subdued tones. Its dinge did not sit upon it as an oppression, but belonged to it. The wail of the gramophone from hidden windows in bye-streets was music to him. The accumulated noise of whippets and terriers was like a welcoming band. Human shapes crossed and recrossed the Square with the aimless movements of supers crossing a stage. Around the stalls moved the Saturday shopping crowd, heavy-footed and cumbersome. In their dour Midland way they made of this high feast a sort of muffled carnival.

And Uncle Reuben chuckled. The forlorn aspect, the acrid smells, the maladroit manners and infelicitous voices pleased him. He understood them. After many years he was again among his own people. He had come to the city of his dreams.

"Well, now fer old Fred. Wonder 'ow 'e'll look? . . ."

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East of Mansion House

In the kitchen of his three-room home in Diprose Street, Fred Housego sat by the fire with his young daughter. A smell of boiled pork and hot iron came from the tiny scullery where an eight o'clock tea was being prepared. Fred sat hunched, staring into the skimpy fire with the sluggishness of the out-of-work man. The girl sat listless, bored; wishful for marvellous revelry. They drew thick breaths of greasy air.

When Joe, the son, came in, stout and radinta with much eating, they stirred a little. Father looked up heavily. The girl looked up keenly and snapped a question. "What did y'ave, Joe? Was it good?"

"Ey, I wish ya'd all bin there. Bes' Works' dinner we've 'ad since I bin here."

"Ar."

"Ey. Firs' there was soop."

"Ar."

"Then two roasts—beef and mootton."

The girl beamed, and saw beef and mutton, rich and brown.

"An' boiled beef and dumplings. An'

Uncle Reuben

then a dom big plum-pudden wi' yaller sauce."

"Ar." She ogled an invisible plum-pudding.

"Ey, I wish ya' all bin there an' 'ad some. I wish I could a' brought some away."

Father roused himself. "Ey, but what's good o' wishin'? We gotter be thankful fer what we bin able t'gat. That dom lock-out . . . But none of us never 'ad no luck. On'y one who ever broke cout were yer Uncle Reuben—an' what's 'appened t'im nobody knows. 'E did well though, they say. . . ."

• • • • •

A mild pop in the scullery announced the turning off of the gas, and the dishing-up of the one meal of the day. They made movements of anticipation. Joe was indifferent; replete with the Works' dinner. Then, as the wife clattered with enamel plates, came a peremptory flourish on the door-knocker. They started and looked at each other.

East of Mansion House

"Whoever can that. . . ."

A knock at the door is always dramatic in side-streets. The girl gave her fancy licence. "What a lark if 'twere Uncle Reuben—wi' a big hamper, an' . . ."

And, of course, it *was* Uncle Reuben. From the street door those in the kitchen heard mumbles and chuckles. Then Joe, who had gone to answer, was pushed aside, and there came in to them a small stout figure, in thick ulster and fur-lined gloves, grey and red-faced. He peered round the room, and fastened on the man.

"Well, Fred!"

They looked up. At once the domestic quiet of the kitchen was shattered and fell into little jumping pieces of surprise and wonder. "Well, ah'm dommed . . . Well, now . . . Ey . . . There! Moother—leuk 'ere—Reub come back! An' us jus' talkin' abeout ya . . . Well. . . ."

The woman raised hand and head. "Why, Reuben—Uncle Reuben!" They shook hands all round. The children stood open-eyed and receptive of the dramatic thrill.

Uncle Reuben

The wife's mind flustered between this brilliant upheaval and the now lustreless boiled pork. Uncle Reuben stood in their midst handsomely receiving their candid stares. They saw a stocky little figure radiating well-being. His clothes were loose, but of fine quality. They stood and eyed the wondrous rich cloth of the ulster, the soft boots, the quiet elegance of the gloves. He wore them all casually, not with the quiet assurance of the man who is getting on, but as one so used to riches as to be completely unconscious of their dignity; one who would be just as happy in corduroys and cotton scarf. Wealth and success never refined your Stewpony man: all his life he is a shirt-sleeves man.

He threw back his overcoat and thrust his hands in his trouser pockets in the brazen Midland manner. "Well, well . . . So y'aven't forgotten me. And this is—what's their names—ah, Joe. And the gel—ah, yes, Maggie. Kiss yer ole uncle, Maggie."

The room went warm with grins. Under

East of Mansion House

them Uncle Reuben glowed and grew in height and bulk. He nodded, and smiled back, and rubbed his hands, and said: "Well, well . . . Ah, well." And his brother said: "Well, Reub . . . Well, who'd a-thought it. Well. . . ."

The wife said:

"Y'are leukin' fine, Reuben. I'll say that. I'd 'ardly know ya. It's nice of ya to come to see us folks, though."

"An' where else would I go—eh? Look 'ere. I got a lot to tell ya. Let's sit down an' 'ave a talk over things—eh? Suppose Joe goes and gets a bottle o' whisky. What about that—eh?"

He pulled a pound-note from his trousers pocket and tossed it to the table. They stared at this magnificence, speechless beyond a still-born "Well, well . . ." The woman was abashed by her splendid visitor. With a worried hand she dusted a chair, and Maggie beamingly proffered it. She was not abashed; for her the air of the room was stimulated with expectation of agreeable events.

Uncle Reuben

They sat; and when Joe brought in the whisky, Uncle opened up:

"Well, Fred, I dessay you bin wonderin' what's 'appened to me; and I dessay I ought 'ave written. But you know—times goes on, an' one thing an' another. However . . . 'ere I am. An' I think I can say I bin doin' pritty well. I got back from Canada last year with a tidy bit, an' since then I done one or two good deals in the City, and . . . well, I begins to look round, and I thinks to meself—'ere I am wi' money—more'n I want. An' I says suddenly—'Wonder 'ow they're goin' on down at Stewpony,' I says. An' then I thought again pr'aps I'd come down an' look y'all up, an' pr'aps look round fer a little place in me ole town. An' 'ere I am. See?"

Father nodded. "Ar." He was a little uncomfortable at his brother's success, but hopeful of what it might mean for the family. He remained brotherly and non-committal.

"Got down 'ere 'sevenin'. Took a room at the Imperial, an' come right round."

East of Mansion House

Joe and Maggie exchanged glances. Their mouths were roundly expressive. A relation of theirs staying at the Imperial . . . But Uncle Reuben turned to the table and looked at the cloth. "Ey, th' old tea-time—eh? Well, what about a bit o' tea?"

Mother went awkward with shame at being reminded of hospitality and with shame of the hospitality she had to offer. "Why Reuben—there—I 'ardly like to—you'll be 'avin such a champion supper at that hotel I, 'ardly like . . . Things ain't very good y'see, and all we got's a bit o' boiled pork. I 'ardly. . . ."

He waved her aside. "Ey, gel, stop worryin'. This is like old times. A bit o' boiled pork—why, ya couldn't offer me nothin' better. I don't mind a swell dinner nows and thens, but I'm a plain man, still. Boiled pork. . . ."

His eyes twinkled. He washed his hands in the air. He was magnanimous. They were delighted with him. He put the thing so politely that the boiled pork became again lustrous, and the woman brought it in, if

Uncle Reuben

not with self-acclamation, at least without shame. They sat down to it.

"Yew mus' tek us as we are, Uncle Reuben. We. . . ."

"Ey, gel, when ah'm in Stewpony ah'm Stewpony laad."

His attitude to the boiled pork was expressive of prodigal enthusiasm. Before his sister-in-law had served herself he had cleared his plate, and passed it up. "I'll come again, my gel. That's a rare bit o' stuff, an' all."

Pious in hospitality, she cut lavishly. The small joint began to wither and wilt. Maggie's eyes were on it and on Uncle's plate. She and father ate rapidly, but even then Uncle was too quick for them. He passed his plate for a third serving. Maggie forgot her manners and looked openly dismayed. The bone was now visible. Mother frowned at Maggie and pressed Uncle to make a good tea and apologized for the meal. Of course, in his position, he wouldn't understand what these things meant to a family suffering under the lock-out.

East of Mansion House

He certainly made a good tea; and when he had done he pushed away his plate and pushed back his chair, and said "Ayl" and "Eyl" He lit a cigar and relapsed into deep thought. Then he rubbed his hands again and smiled.

"Well, I didn't come down 'ere fer nothing. I 'eard about the lock-out 'ere an' I says to meself—'they may a got on, or they may be like they was. If they ain't got on, they'll be feelin' it a bit.' And I see 'ow things are with ya. Well, now—if it ain't too late, there's a job fer Mother an' Maggie. To get the biggest Sunday dinner y'ever got. See?" He caught Maggie's twitching lips. "Ey, young lady, Uncle Reuben'll show ya. What about this, now? First—a nice goose or chicken. Eh? An' a bit o' beef for supper. An' fruit. Oranges an' apples an' nuts—Brazil nuts. An' sausages. An' bacon. An' a good big plum-duff."

The woman grew interested, but fidgety under this lavishness. "But Reuben. . . ."

"I haven't finished yet. A bottle o' port fer Mother. An' another bottle o' whisky

Uncle Reuben

fer Dad an' me. A bottle of ginger-wine for these two. And what about coals? Must 'ave a good fire. An' a good big cake an' some jam tarts."

"Why, Unc-le Reu-ben! I must say . . . Well, I don't know 'ow to thank you. Why. . . ."

Uncle's eyes twinkled. His face grew luminous with the grace of giving. "I 'aven't finished yet. You're the on'y folks I've got, an' I can see 'ow things are with ya. All this money's nothin' t'me. I couldn't be 'appy among them 'igh-up folk, in big 'ouses, and that . . . so I'll spend it among me own. Now I reckon a noo dress wouldn't do Mother no 'arm—eh? An' Maggie—a noo Sunday costume. An' I dessay Joe could do with a rig-out."

Their eyes became hot and wide. The spirit of all fairy princes rustled about that kitchen. It was as though the Bank of England had thrown open its doors and asked them to help themselves. Frocks . . . Hats . . . Boots . . . Costumes . . . Suits . . . The vision made them limp. Uncle sat erect

East of Mansion House

and masterful. A little nimbus of chuckles danced about his grizzled head. He tossed three crumpled pound-notes on the table. "There y'are, mother. That'll see to the dinner t'morrer. Now—ow're the youngsters goin' on at work, Fred?"

"Ey, so-so, Reuben. So-so."

"Ah. Satisfied?" He turned to Joe and Maggie.

"Well, I. . . ."

"Why, I. . . ."

"Ey, I see . . . Well, I was wonderin' whether a bit of a lift-up were wanted. Yew know. Means a lot t'young fellers sometimes. Eh?"

"Well. . . ." Father deputed for Joe. "Joe, 'e's mad on motors. Wants t'get into the business an' start a repair shop an' all. But. . . ."

"Ar. Well, well. If 'e's got 'is 'cart in it, I don't reckon there need be any trouble about that. An' Maggie—what's she want t'do? Must look after 'er. Uncle Reuben always looks after the little ladies."

They laughed excessively. Uncle Reuben

Uncle Reuben

was a wag. Riches hadn't spoilt him a bit. Just the same as ever. He still dropped his aspirates. He still talked as they talked, ate as they ate, thought as they thought. Still hearty and homely.

He unfolded bright schemes for them. He discussed the details of that repair shop. He listened to Maggie's stories of the Business Training School, and the fees required for its various courses, and he nodded and "A'd." Joe caught his habit and rubbed hands at his prospect. Maggie checked an incipient dance and rubbed her elbow instead.

"Well, yew make inquiries, and then come an' talk t'me. I'll see ya settled in something. It's the sort o'thing I've alwis wanted t'do. I don't know a better use fer money than settin' up the young fellers. I bin young meself, wanting to do things, an' not able t'start fer want of a bit o' capital. So I know what it means. I alwis said if I made money I'd look after the beginners."

"Ey, Reuben, if there were more like

East of Mansion House

yew . . . Dom sight better than subscribin' to charities."

"Ey, it is, an' all. If all the money given to missionaries was given to start the youngsters, it'd be a better country. I bin through it, y'know."

"Well, I'm sure we must think ourselves very lucky. I dunno 'ow we shall thank ya."

"Uncle don't want no thanks. It's a pleasure t'be able to do it. It's a treat t'see your 'appy faces, that it is . . . Well, well. I'll be gettin' along to the hotel. I've 'ad a tirin' day. But I'll be round sharp an' early to-morrer. An' 'appen me an' Dad'll take a walk to the Fox and Goose, 'fore dinner' if it's still there."

They clustered round him in ministration as he put on his coat and buttoned up. It took five foaming minutes to see him off; then they came back to the kitchen and looked at each other, and grinned in amazement, and looked at the money on the table and said. "Well. . . ."

"'Nother knock," said Maggie. "Pr'aps 'e's sent somethin' reound for us."

Uncle Reuben

This time she beat Joe to the door. It was Uncle Reuben back again, but he was followed by another man, who pushed his way in. He looked keenly at the family and the kitchen. He looked at the money on the table, and turned to Uncle Reuben.

"Is that some of it?"

Uncle Reuben nodded. The other man took the notes, folded them and put them in his pocket. Father and Mother started forward. "Ey . . . 'ere . . . Ey. . . ."

The other man spoke. "I'm a police-officer. I hold a warrant for the arrest of this man for a burglary in Tottenham Court Road and the theft of a complete outfit of clothes and the sum of six pounds. In what way is he known to you?"

"Known to me? 'E's ma brother. Yew made a mistake. Yew can't tek 'im. That's my brother, Reuben Housego from Canada. What's arl this?"

The officer was formal and precise. He did not smile or express concern at Father's charge. He said: "No mistake. I know this man well. We. . . ."

East of Mansion House

"But Reuben's a rich man. He wouldn't wanta do a thing like that. Ya makin' a silly mistake."

"Look at him," said the officer. "Ask him."

They looked at him, then. He was suddenly limp and abject. He had the appearance of one who has slept all night in his clothes in the open. They were two sizes too big for him. He stood bowed, dumb, and ludicrous, dividing his attitude between respect for the officer and dismay at his present situation. He quavered and cringed. He was very old.

"Mean t'say Reuben's a crook, then? That 'ow 'e got rich?"

"Reuben Housego never was rich, and never was a crook—till last night. Reuben Housego's been known to the police of Covent Garden for ten years as a licensed street-hawker."

There was a blot of silence.

They stood in a foolish, staring group. Crash went the dinner. Away flew the motor garage. Down the wind went the Business

Uncle Reuben

Training. Out of sight went the new frock, the new suit, the new costume, and the coals. The woman fell into a chair and sobbed into her apron. The man's face was thick with rage. Joe was truculent with mortification. Maggie's eyes went tearful, and she bent over the table, weeping and staring at the beastly old hoaxer. They went for him.

"Urr—ya wicked old blaggard!"

"Urr—ya dirty old ippacrit, yew!"

"Urr—ya sneakin' ole 'umbug. Ya liar!"

"Come 'ere stuffin' us up wi' yer lies—laughin' up yer sleeve at us—stuffin' us wi' yer fine promises—makin' fools of us all. Wodya du it for, y'ole liar, yew? Eh? Wot devil put y'up to it—eatin' our dinner—leadin' us on—an'—an'—an' . . . raisin' our 'opes. Wodya du it for?"

He waved a limp hand in protest. "I'm sorry, lad. I'm sorry. I dunno what come over me. I did'n' mean t'go as far as promisin' all them things. I dunno what come over me. But. . . ."

"But wodya du it for?"

He looked round beseechingly. "Why,

East of Mansion House

ya see, I'm an ole man. A silly ole man. All me life I bin poor and no good to nobody. An' somethin' come over me last night—I wonnid t'see—just fer once—what it felt like t'be rich an' able to make people 'appy . . ."

IV—WHITE WINGS

IV

WHITE WINGS

FOR love and for all young lovers this tale is made. They tell it of Jenny Drumpin in the bars and tea-houses of Pennyfields—or, rather, she tells it herself and they pass its fragments about with levity. They speak of pipe-dreams and the bottom of the glass, but she says it is true, and from it traces all her present misery.

Perhaps their doubts are justified; Jenny has lived and listened for so many years in those streets where truth and fable meet and mingle in smoke and the music of guitars, that a seaman's lie has become for her as the Blackwall tramcar for others.

Anyway, it is hardly a tale for the public bar or the pavements of Poplar, but a tale for the aged, bowed in the chimney-corner over old dreams; or for boys and girls, to

East of Mansion House

be whispered or sung in moonlight alleys by the sea. But Jenny never sits at a fire-side, and though she whispers to herself in the alleys of Limehouse, no boy or girl has ever stopped to listen. Even if they did—

But here is the tale.



It appears—and this is the first touch of a fable—that the grizzled and palsied Jenny Drumpin was once young and lovely, full of the colt's quiver, and much looked upon by the boys. At eighteen none was so chased and chi-iked as Jenny, none so pert, and none so gay. She had, they say, dense black hair that shone purple where the light caught it, a clear and ardent eye, and a mouth that was fairly maddening. Every evening, when she came out from Amoy Place, plumed and radiant for the holiday hours, never less than six of the most delectable lads were gathered on the corner, awaiting her judgment and selection. There were Handy Finklestein, Joe Glover, Calcutta Charlie, and—well, enough

White Wings

to afford wide choice for her and consolation prizes for her friends. And when she had made her choice, she saw to it that the unsuccessful paired with these friends. Whether the friends felt towards her as loyal maids-in-waiting should feel towards a queen is not known; but it is certain that they were glad to be of her group, since where she went the boys went; better a rejected boy of the queen's than none at all.

So in those days she danced, kicking the hours lightly from her heels and leaving care alone; while across the road, on the edge of Chinatown, a wharf foreman went upon his occasions, knowing nothing of Jenny Drumpin nor noting the diminishing days that lay between him and sorrow.

Young Ben Cutbush lived in Three Colt Street, but though he lived in a tiny home in a poor street, and rightly belonged there, his home was different from other homes, in that he had a servant. The servant's name was Chan Lee, a Chinese dwarf and a hunchback. A few years ago Ben had

East of Mansion House

been well on the road to a mate's ticket; but he had never reached it. A night ashore put an end to it. An affair in the native quarter left him in the morning with one sound eye, and a small hunchback creature who followed him dog-like and snapped at those who would part him from his chosen lord. Carelessly, humorously, Ben recognised that he had acquired a slave who regarded the foreign devil who had rescued him from last night's torment as a lord to be served to the end. So he accepted him, and in the same mood brought him home with him, and there, in the four-roomed house for which he paid his brother ten shillings a week, they had lived these four years; Ben at the docks during the day and with his pals in the evening; while Chan Lee cleaned the house, did the shopping, washed his master's shirts, and prepared his meals, uniting the duties of valet, cook, housemaid, and butler.

Soon these two became well known; and all Poplar and Limehouse knew the little twisted waif that trotted about the alleys

White Wings

with basket and bag, looking up sideways as though expectant of assault, and peering at the world through long eyes of topaz. Wherever he went he received smiles—English smiles—instead of kicks and derision, for in these parts to meet a hunchback is a sign of good luck. A few people grinned at Ben's *ménage*, but he only grinned back. "My mascot. Always thought I'd find me luck in China, but all I found was this—and lorst me ticket."

Not only did Chan Lee clean and cook and shop, but in the evenings, when his master went roaming, Chan Lee followed, crawling in dark corners, hugging the wall, appearing always unexpectedly. Wherever the boy was seen at nights—usually outside certain places—it was known that Ben Cutbush was inside; and though, on occasions, as when an old shipmate landed, Ben made too much of a night of it, always he got safely home. Always Chan Lee was his kindly light, awaiting him at chucking-out time, and leading the way.

Now one night, at the meeting of the

East of Mansion House

roads by the Eastern Hotel, there was a meeting of lives.

It was evening; Jenny had just made her magnificent appearance on the corner, and the boys stood apart in airy attitudes. Through the blue haze cars went swimming. Lights went up. Shop doors became brisk. From the Asiatics' Home came the beat of a drum and deep accents of unhappiness crooning of Burma. Scent from automatic machines mingled with the smells of the compound. There was languid bustle, in which the Orient went in brown boots and regimental ties, turbans moved among straw hats, and the red fez of Arabia brushed the second-best feathers of Stepney. The streets were all a-chuckle.

Jenny was looking about her, and thinking of flicking an eye at a likely lad in tight trousers, when there was a stir; then cries; then a clamour of brakes on wheels and flying figures. From the "Star of the East," Ben Cutbush had crossed with a friend to the other place, and, as they passed inside, Chan Lee streaked across the road

White Wings

after them. Thought of his master's welfare blotted out all thought of tramcars and cycles; he went streaking through them; and was almost at the farther kerb when a cycle caught his foot. He stumbled; fell; and a lorry coming round West India Dock Road was upon him. Everybody on that corner saw it coming, and everybody cried, and the cries opened all doors and emptied all bars. But Jenny Drumpin didn't cry. She knew this funny little creature by sight, and liked him; and when she saw him down she made two quick steps from the pavement, one grab, two steps back, and the horses swung aside clear of them.

Gravely Chan Lee picked himself up, and while the crowd gathered round, and eyes and voices pelted Jenny with approval, he stood still, dusting himself and looking up at her. Then, into the centre of the press came Big Ben. He looked at the boy, and said two sharp words. Then he turned and looked at Jenny Drumpin who was urging the world to shut up and get away. He looked so hard that her eyes were drawn

East of Mansion House

to look at him. He said: "Thanks for that," and grinned. "He's my boy, y'know—my house-boy. He'd a-bin done if it hadn't a-bin for you. While they was shoutin' you done it. You got the nerve all right."

She patted her hair and swung her heel. "Oh—'snothing."

"Wanted doin' though. You'd a-made a good sailor. You jump to it."

She smirked. "Think so?" She had heard about this Big Ben, owner of the hunchback Chink, and had seen him sometimes about the bars and the streets. He had always seemed bigger than other fellows, though he wasn't tall; and particularly at this moment when they were making themselves a nuisance with their frantic applause, his face, which was one big grin aimed straight at her, moved her to awkwardness and made her feel cheap. Yet she didn't hurry him away. Between them at their knees stood Chan Lee. She put a hand down and stroked his head, and picked from his shoulder a little white feather that clung to him. She held it in

White Wings

her fingers and blew it away. It wavered in the air, circled, and settled on her hat.

"Reckon 'e's a first-rate servant, eh? Don't 'alf seem to look after you. Always chasing you here an' there."

"Oh, he's all right."

"Where d'yeh git 'im?"

"Oh, picked 'im up. Canton, y'know."

"You bin to China?"

"Ah." He turned to go. Then turned back. "You with this gang?"

"'M."

Again he turned, and again turned back. "D'you know—if I was as fine a gel as you I'd take a bit o' care of meself."

"What?" She swung; it seemed that she was about to show one of her "flare-ups" from which her world ran.

"Not go about with that gang. You're worth something better. Good night."

With his great grin still on his face, he turned away with his friend, and Chan Lee went trotting after them. He left Jenny stroking her cheek, looking after them. It seemed that her cheek was smarting. Then

East of Mansion House

she swung round to the crowd and said, "Well, I'm damned. 'Ear that?" Never had any man spoken to her like that without getting a good one back. Impudence! Why, she'd half a mind to go after him, and . . . Then the crowd scattered, traffic moved on, and the group pulled her among themselves and went their usual evening way. But she wasn't herself that evening; not so facile or so free; and the boy she had honoured began to wonder whether his tie was up the back of his collar or what was the matter with him.

• • • • •

Now it came about that in the evenings following this affair, Jenny began to be aware that she was seeing this Big Ben more frequently, and she found herself thinking about him and his impudence. He seemed to be wherever she was; not exactly following her—though she wanted to think that he was, so that she might be indignant—indeed, he hardly gave her a glance; but wherever she went he began to appear. At

White Wings

first she was scornful; then restless under it; then exasperated. She owed him one, and she began to hope that he would approach her again, so that she might work up some cutting phrase or airy word that would put him in his place and crowd the laughs on him. But, somehow, the more she considered him, the less opening there seemed to be for wit. He was all grin and amiability; and wit, she felt, would either misfire or glide off him. It wasn't that she wouldn't dare to. Oh, no; she was up to anything. But she recognised, with some annoyance, that his quality wasn't the quality of her crowd.

She began to bite upon that remark he had made to her. He was a man who had seen the world and knew things—not the sort of fellow who would say smart things for fun, although he grinned when saying it. Perhaps there was something in it. Perhaps it was true that she was worth better things. She had always known that she was better than the crowd; but it was pleasant to be queen, even of that crowd.

East of Mansion House

Only . . . perhaps he meant that she might be queen of something better. Perhaps . . .

But wherever she went he was almost sure to be there, with his one grinning eye and his thrusting manner, and his flow of gossip that gathered men about him; and what most annoyed her was that on the evenings when he wasn't there, she was conscious of a feeling of emptiness.

Well, it came to the festival of the quarter—the Feast of Lanterns—and she and the crowd went out to celebrate, for a feast is a feast, whether it's your occasion or the other fellow's. In West India Dock Road, the return of the cemetery procession dressed the evening mist with lanterns. Through the blue night, the white and scarlet globes of Eastern Carnival mingled with the golden clouds of fried-fish bars, and young blood stirred to the dance of drums and gongs, and the fiery colour and the old songs. While standing or swaying with the crowd, and blowing kisses to amiable yellow faces, she felt a touch as of something fiddling round her; and looking down,

White Wings

saw Chan Lee. She turned to brush him aside.

"What the devil you messing at, Monkey-Face?"

The monkey-face looked up at her with his long eyes, and said, "I look after you, Miss."

"You what? You——? 'Ere—you 'op it. I don't want neither you nor yer boss to look after me. You . . ." But there was something in those silly eyes, as in Ben Cutbush's grin, that muddled her, so that she couldn't think of anything else to say; and while she was floundering, the girls pulled her into the thick of the procession, and she forgot all about it. But when they retired to the "Blue Lantern" to warm up, there was Big Ben sitting in the corner, grinning and chatting with a couple of pals. He was getting to be a fair nuisance, but she wasn't going to let him spoil her evening, so she didn't even look at him, but gave him her back, and drank level with the rest and got gay. From the "Lantern" they went to the café in Pennyfields, and had a noodle and some lychees. The company was good.

East of Mansion House

The electric piano bubbled and quivered, and somebody sang songs, and others danced, and pipes wailed, and some went to the back room for puck-a-poo, and everybody wore the haggard bulldog look of those who are out for a Good Time, and are going to have it.

Of course they soon got tired of that particular Good Time, and Jenny carried them to the "Ship at Anchor," nearly knocking Chan Lee down at the foot of the stairs. A binge began. It was in the middle of the binge that she became conscious, by a prickling at the back of the head, with which she was now familiar, that she was being watched. She turned; and there, again in the corner, was Big Ben—but alone this time.

Damn the man!

What the devil was he after? Who did he think he was, following people about, and staring at them like that? For two pins she'd . . . She was just about on the pitch of the evening, then; ready for anything. If he didn't stop it, she'd get up and

White Wings

go over to him, and say: "Look 'ere, Boss-eye, reckon you'll know me again if you look a bit longer—eh?" Something like that. The grinning fool.

Her third whisky was put before her and she was just framing the words for the telling-off, when she heard him get up and come across to their table. He stopped in front of her. She looked up, summoning all the indignation which she was entitled to feel, and he looked down, and his face was one big grin. A matey, let's-be-pals face, which somehow froze her nerve; and though she opened her mouth to shoot out the sharp things she had stored up, nothing came. Instead, to her own shame, that big face made her giggle, and when she did that he put out a hand, took her glass from her fingers, put it on another table, and took hold of her arm. "Come outside, gel."

This brought her back to seriousness.

"Eh?"

"Come outside."

"Come . . . 'Ere—I say! What's the game, mister? Who d'yer think . . ."

East of Mansion House

The crowd stared idly, waiting to see the bouncer, who clearly didn't know the sort of girl he was meddling with, crushed to earth. She knew that they were waiting for it, and she knew that it was for her, the queen, to assert herself. She made an effort.

"Say—young fellow—that's my arm. Want to feel what it's made of? 'Cos if so . . ." She gave him that cold stare that had smitten many bold ones to ineptitude; but only for a moment did she hold it. To the disgust of the crowd she turned her eyes away, looked across the room, and giggled again. She shook her arm once; but his hand stayed there, and he repeated: "Come outside. I want to talk to you." They were too surprised for anything but "Strewth!" when, on that word of command, they saw their leader surrender. They saw her get up, and they saw the grinning Ben take her by the arm and lead her out. When she reached the door they recovered, and called after her: "Hi! Who's yer pal? You ain't goin' with 'im? Wot yeh lettin' 'im do

White Wings

that for?" Then she was outside, and the game was afoot. Two of them went to the door, and looked down the street, but they reported that she and the man had vanished, and there was only that little humpy Chink boy of his scuttering along Pekin Street.

• • • • •

What had come over Jenny that night nobody rightly knew; but she went quietly with Ben Cutbush to the half-lit corner of Gill Street. There she stopped dead, making one more effort at the regal.

"Look 'ere—dammit—what is it you want? Always 'anging round me, an' . . ."

And when he said: "I want you. See? I want *you*. That gang's spoiling you. You're the gel I bin looking for fer years. When I first saw you I knew you was my gel. You know my name, don't you? I live down Three Colt Street. I got a good job at the docks, and I'm straight. You're going to leave that gang an' come with me, and let me make you happy. Ain't you?" When he said these things she had no

East of Mansion House

answer. The evening feast was in her head; the street lamps were dancing with her pulses; the noise and perfume and the hot summons of carnival had gone to her heart.

She just looked at him and giggled, and then smiled a smile that Amoy Place had never seen. She was still smiling when a patter of feet brought Chan Lee towards them. Ben jerked a head at him and laughed. "My servant. He'll be your servant, too, if you'll let him. Will you? Remember how we first met?" He laughed again. It seemed that she was supposed to see the whole affair as one glorious bit of fun. It was certain that she must say something. "You — you -- you ——" and she finished lamely with: "You are a One! You—you seem to think you can do just what you like. Followin' me about—and—and sayin' things, and . . ."

"There's a lot o' things I got to say yet. I don't suppose you care what a chap of my sort's got to say. You don't even know me like. . . ."

"Oh, I know all about you, my boy!"

White Wings

He jumped at it. "Do you? Reely? I wonder whether you'd ever . . ."

"Ever what?"

"I wonder what you think of me?"

"Blowed if I know!" And she didn't. She only knew that these moments in his company were by no means as irritating as his stares. She knew that she had been wanting him to speak. She knew why she had never been able to tell him off. She was now in a mood of smiling sulkiness. "Dunno why I let you talk like this. I never let the others. I s'pose you're different some'ow. You make me feel . . ."

He put an arm on her shoulder and pressed it inwards. "Look here—the house is just down here. Why not . . ."

She went with him without further question; and that night there were wondrous happenings in a back room of a house in Three Colt Street; a double Feast of Lanterns.

Whether Chan Lee knew, by some Eastern magic, or some occult sight vouchsafed to the cripple, that his master that night

East of Mansion House

would win his desire, I cannot say. It looked as though he did, for they say he had transformed that back room into a fantasia of colour. The walls were burning with banners and masks of scarlet and blue. On the mantelpiece stood a joss of prosperity and longevity. From a vase at the corner punk-sticks were smouldering. Paper mottoes of green and yellow were pinned over the pictures. All the junk, indeed, that he had been able to rifle from Ben's boxes upstairs—relics of his wanderings—was scattered about his room. And in the centre of the table stood his own love-gift—a great empty ginger-jar, black and red, which he had stolen while Ho Ling, the storekeeper, was out of his shop watching the show.

And now he went padding joyfully about to serve them with a little meal, while Jenny surrendered to this sudden new ordering of her life without another thought of dignity or withdrawal. She was still, she felt, a queen, and this was her new realm; and though she wondered why she had thus let herself be, as it were, pushed on to a throne,

White Wings

she was content. She knew that she would do, and gladly, anything that this big boy asked of her.

All through the meal Chan Lee was hovering between them, attending her and anticipating her, and gravely watching her face to see whether his dishes (good enough for his master) were worthy of his master's white angel. And when Jenny said—nodding towards him—" 'E's a rum 'un, ain't 'e? I reckon you're a couple o' rum 'uns," and his master barked with laughter, he was satisfied that all was well.

By midnight the house was dark, but it was not silent. Together they went upstairs, and he took her to him, and she let him undress her, and four walls enclosed them in a strange world. From outside came faintly the last weary flourishes of the Feast; and above it, close to their ears, the thin note of Chan Lee's one-stringed guitar and a small tuneless voice, making a song to them, as he sat on the top stair by their door. The night flowed between them.

By the girls and boys of Amoy Place,

East of Mansion House

Jenny was counted out, and she didn't care. The start of the change had been sudden, but it worked slowly. Slowly noisiness and flashiness passed from her. She bloomed. Her boy had told her that she was beautiful, and punched her and laughed as he said it; and though she was little more than pretty, she began to be beautiful. She took trouble with herself. Being accepted as one of grace and character, she had to live up to this standard—at first with a side-long giggle—but soon, unconsciously, she did become gracious and quiet, and knew great happiness.

She had two devout worshippers—Big Ben and Chan Lee—and she had a home and a real good boy to look after; a boy who understood her. She was no fool; Ben had been right in spotting her as better than her crowd, and she entered easily into the business of wife. Gracefully Chan Lee surrendered certain of his duties to her, while persisting in the less pleasant—the cleaning and the washing. Each morning, when she went to Salmon Lane market, he

White Wings

followed her with the basket, and helped the bargaining with his longer experience. Wherever she went he was in faithful attendance. He required no orders. He did the work as he had always done it, standing by it when done, for her approval, so that every evening Ben had a neat home, a bright table, and an unbothered girl awaiting him. He was servant and entertainer, and his quaintness delighted her as it amused Ben. His upturned doggy eyes, his queer voice and phrases, his guitar, the funny way he made tea, and the smiling service he gave, made the day pleasant for her.

So for many months they lived with beauty. There were the glad awakenings in the morning; the farewell; the house to see to; the marketing; the strolls in the Gardens; Chan Lee, sitting on the floor of the kitchen, while she drank tea in the front room, playing his guitar and singing little lonesome songs to her; Ben's tea to be thought of and prepared; Ben coming home; the meeting at the door; the thump-

East of Mansion House

ing and punching in the ribs; the laughter; the meal; the music-hall perhaps, and then to Ben's arms.

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But the passing of the months brought a difference. You know how it is in that second half-year. The unique began to melt into the commonplace. Six months of ecstasy brought its reaction. Chan Lee ceased to be the quaint little figure she had first found him. He became an ordinary part of life; then an irritation. The pleasure and importance of possessing a servant passed. For one thing, he was always about. She couldn't go anywhere or turn anywhere without seeing him. It was as it used to be when Ben was turning up everywhere, only there was nothing here to give it point. It gave her the feeling of being spied on. His ugliness and his hump began to disgust her. If he came near her she wanted to draw away. In her fancy too, he was an object that sometimes came between her and Ben. Both were ministers

White Wings

to Ben, as he and Ben were ministers to her, and she began to have a sense of rivalry with the boy. He was so adept, so familiar with his master, so obviously a favourite. Ben seemed to think far too much of him—not as he thought of her, of course, but still, the boy was part of his life; and she was soon seeing him as the ordinary wife sees her husband's friends or work or club, or anything that takes his thoughts from herself. She couldn't understand what he could find in this misshapen little creature, why he should take any notice of its worship. If it had been a dog now. . . . Lots of men were silly about dogs, but this deformed little Chink. . . .

And it had all come out of that affair at Canton, an affair of their own, of which she knew nothing. All she got when she asked about it was—"Oh, usual native quarter row, y'know. They were knocking him about, and we'd all had more'n enough. So there was a row."

Slowly she came to detest the boy, and the boy knew it, and foolishly increased it

East of Mansion House

by thrusting service and deference upon her, and making flustering efforts to keep his master's home as smooth and happy as a Chinese servant would have it. She began to catch rumours of laughter as she went about the streets—laughter centring on Chan Lee and his attendance. She overheard phrases from her old acquaintance. "Look at the Duchess an' 'er footman. Beauty and the Beast. Which is Beauty—eh? I wonder whether 'im an' 'er . . ."

She gave him orders to stop following her about, and he obeyed, but still she found him watching her from distant corners, and this and his ugliness fretted her nerves. Ben began to notice her humours, and to ask clumsy questions and get petulant answers; and because of them he didn't grin and laugh and punch her so often. They began to talk to each other in half-sentences, snaps. There were little jars and asperities. Nothing definite; nothing *said*; but a daily testiness, as if the air were full of glass-dust.

One evening as they sat together in the back room. she spoke out. Ben was smok-

White Wings

ing; she was reading a weekly paper; Chan Lee was playing and singing to them from the kitchen. After five minutes of this she threw down the paper, and said, as though carrying on a subject of argument:

"I wish you'd get rid of 'im, y'know. 'E *does* git on my nerves so."

"He what? Who does? Gits—— What?"

She snapped. "Gits on my nerves. That row 'e's alwis makin' out there. Gnah gnah-gnah. Wow-wow-wow."

He looked like a man who had slipped on something. "Row? Row? Why, that's one of his love-songs. A Cantonese love-song. He's alwis sung that ever since . . ."

"Well, 'e gits on my nerves. Tell 'im 'e's got to stop it. Else——"

Thereafter, day by day, the kitchen was silent, except for the hiss of his slippers against the stone floor. And that, too, got on her nerves, and Ben saw it, and turned moody; and one night stayed out late with a couple of pals; and next morning they both had nerves.

East of Mansion House

It began from nothing; mere reaction from excess of delight; and it grew into that day-to-day petulance that destroys from the heart outwards. She knew that Ben was worried because of her dislike of Chan Lee, and she knew that she was doing a dangerous thing in persisting in it. But she couldn't stop. The boy *was* ugly, and did worry her. She wouldn't even listen to her old aunt.

"If you ain't careful, me gel, you'll drive 'im away from yeh. You got a good man and you oughta keep 'im. Lord, everybody's got something to put up with, ain't they? Why cancher leave 'im alone about 'is boy? A hunchback's lucky, too."

"Perhaps. But 'ow'd you like to have a ugly thing like that about the 'ouse all day? Eh? Poppin' up everywhere. Can't never be alone for a minute. Droppin' feathers all over the house, too. Out o' them fusty stores where he hangs about, I suppose. Gives yer the creeps."

"Taa, yeh fool! Thought you'd got more sense. It's things like this that makes

White Wings

trouble with man and wife. I know. I'm older'n you."

"Oh, yew——" The tone dismissed the fancies of the aged.

Nor would she listen to old Ho Ling who kept the corner store. "Never try to catcha hold of love. For if you catcha him you break his wings and he die."

"Tch! You bin smokin', ain't yeh?"

And then, seeing that Ben had no intention of getting rid of the boy, she brooded upon it as a wrong, and in sheer perversity of temper must go and taunt him with no longer loving her. When he had rebounded from the assault, he was all jerks. "Why—good Lord—Jenny—why. Whatever's the matter now?"

"That boy!"

"You still on that? Why, but—you use' to be so fond of him. And Lord knows he'd do anything for you."

"I know, I know. He was new to me then. And different. But it ain't nice bein' alone in the 'ouse all day with a Chinky creepin' about. An' you alwis seem to think so mighty much of 'im."

East of Mansion House

"Oh, come now. That be blowed. I got to look after him. Y'see, 'e sort o' cottoned to me, and followed me from China. And I've alwis called him my mascot. Our mascot. If it hadn't a-bin for 'im, y'know, I wouldn't a-found you. You wouldn't ask me to kick a poor kid like that into the streets."

"You would if you loved me, an' knew 'ow 'e gives me the fidgets. Anybody'd think, the way you talk, I was askin' you to kill 'im. One o' the Chinks round 'ere'd take 'im in soon enough. 'E wouldn't starve."

"But—but—he's our luck, remember. He's our luck."

"Oh, chuck it. 'E's alwis in the way. Can't never be alone."

"He's only lookin' after you."

"Well, I don't want 'im to. I only want you."

"Jealous of him? Don't be silly. I like to know you got someone while I'm away. And he worships you. You'd be sorry if you did get rid of him, I bet. 'Sides, he's

White Wings

bin wi' me nearly five years now. It'd break his 'cart if I sent him off."

"Chinks ain't got no 'earts."

"Oh, ain't they?"

"No. 'E'd settle down somewhere else—like a cat—an' be just as 'appy."

"You don't know much about Chinks then."

"Perhaps I don't, and don't want to. Still if you think more of 'im than——"

"Oh, my God!" He swang from the fire-place; then turned with hand out, as one appealing for fair play, as Chan Lee slid into the room to clear the tea-table. "Look here, gel—I mean—you didn't ought to say things like that. Why——"

"Well, I told you what——" At that moment the boy had slid to her side of the table. She was looking down at the fire. As she turned in the middle of her sentence, not knowing that he was there, her hand touched the top of his head, and she finished with, "Oh - fer - God's - sake - get - outa - the - way." And pushed him.

She pushed him with a blow in the neck

East of Mansion House

from her open hand, and with tray and two cups he toppled back, struck a chair, and fell with a bump and clatter.

"Jenny!" Ben looked at her. He looked at the boy. He scratched his face. He stared and stared at her, as though he had never before seen her. She said, lamely, "Well, it was 'is fault. I didn't know 'e was there. Comin' behind me like that."

"But, Jenny! Reely!"

Chan Lee got up, gravely, as on that other occasion. He looked swiftly at both of them. Then he gathered up tray and cups and shuffled into the kitchen, and left them standing, without words. Ben looked dazed and hurt. She looked and was sullen. She knew what he was thinking, and she knew that he was right. But she wasn't going to admit it. The knowledge that she was in the wrong made her determined to stay in it. Let him say what he liked. She didn't care. She would have said, "I'm sorry," if he hadn't been looking at her like that, but——

Neither knew how to handle the situa-

White Wings

tion, and neither moved. There was silence in the room and in the kitchen. She kicked with her foot two little feathers that lay on the carpet near the table.

But gradually this large silence became a roar to her ears, and to break it she said the first thing that came to her. "What's 'e doin' out there? 'E's very quiet." Ben said nothing. "'E's alwis gettin' in the way. What's 'e up to?" From the kitchen came a click, and again silence. She looked towards the kitchen door, and Ben looked too. She wondered, and was worried. These Chinks—you never knew what they might do. And she'd hit him.

Then Ben went into the kitchen, and she heard him grunt. He spoke over his shoulder. "The back door's open. He's gorn."

"Gorn?" He spoke so quietly that she felt as though the affair was finished, and that all would be well.

"Ah. Gorn. For good, too. Gorn proper. He's taken his joss. And his prayer-papers. And his guitar." The tone changed. "Well, you wanted him gorn, and

East of Mansion House

now 'e's gorn. You've thrown yer luck away! I hope you're satisfied!"

"Well, I——"

He snatched his hat from a peg behind the door, slammed the door, and went out by the kitchen way. He had not even looked at her. Thinking of his luck. Thinking all the time of the boy. Couldn't a-bin more upset if it had been his son. Suppose—— She sat there making excuses for herself, hating herself, pitying herself, certain that she was no longer loved. For ten minutes she sat and wrung her fingers, and cried, and stared at the fire. Then, sick of the silence, and fancying all the time that she could hear the whisper of Chan Lee's feet in the kitchen, she got up. Might as well go out as sit there. She went out.

She went out by the way Ben had gone, and in the street to which the back way opened, she asked about him. "Ben? Oh, ah—I see 'im runnin' down Narrer Street." She went to Narrow Street. She didn't know why she was going. Not to offer to make it up—not yet awhile. But this yel-

White Wings

low boy might turn on Ben. They did queer things sometimes. Not that Ben couldn't look after himself. Only—— She began to run.

Narrow Street was dark and damp, and lamps and windows made yellow splashes in the air. From the river came rumours of the river's life—the mournful sound of hooters—the throb of a police boat—the ring of the engine telegraph—the hiss of steamers. A Chink came up from a water-alley, and passed a packet to a lounge. She spoke to the lounge. "Eh? Big Ben? Down at Housego's wharf, I fink. 'E went that way."

She went down the lane and came on to the landing-stage. A small tug was alongside. Its side-lights danced in the water. Its headlight made a crimson blot. As she reached the wharf she heard chanting voices.

"All right?"

"All right!"

"Let 'er go. 'Alt speed. Steady."

There was the clang of a bell. The blast

East of Mansion House

of a whistle. The beat of the engine. The churning of the water. Slowly the tug swung away from the side, set herself to midstream, hesitated, then slid forward. In the moment of its hesitation, she heard a cry, Ben's voice, from somewhere on the wharf. She went towards the voice and found him. "What is it? What is it?"

"Look!" He pointed to the tug. "He's gone!" There, in the stern, stood Chan Lee, his hand raised in farewell.

Then, Jenny says, as she stared she saw him straighten himself. She saw him grow taller. She says she saw the hump disappear. And as Ben caught her arm and pointed, she saw Chan Lee stand erect, and loosen his coat and shake his shoulders. From beneath his coat, where the hump had been, there fell into the water two little white wings and a broken bow.

V-CRASH!

V

CRASH I

IT was like Freddie Drumpitts to fall in love with that sort of girl; the dreamy mortal in the world's pit will always look up to heaven for the shadow of happiness when the substance is lying all around him.

She lived in Stewpony. Her father was a prominent small-townsmen, and she was—well, Brussels education, At Homes, Tennis Teas, Nice People—the usual three thousand-a-year middle-class thing, but as far removed from Freddie as a princess of the blood. He was advance-agent for the *Kiss Me and Slap Me* revue, living in a welter of petty discontents; and she and her world and her house with its carriage-sweep and three servants stood to him for beauty unattainable. He couldn't even meet her on the edge of her world. He had one suit of

East of Mansion House

clothes, and the social habits of the Theatrical Special. Yet this fool, meeting this girl, fell in love with her, and on a return visit of his company to Stewpony, he told her so. Poor, h-less, with the accent of Board School playgrounds, he looked towards her and the green lawns of her home as to the world where rightly he belonged.

She turned him down? Oh, no. She dandled him. For twelve months she dandled him up and down the walls of his pit; while he, for twelve months, reached up to her, and held her in his mind in the image of the cool music of a piano in summer drawing-rooms. For her part she was mildly moved by him; ardour and worship are grateful to princesses, whether they come from princes or ploughboys. If she had been able to find a word that expressed him, the word would have been "interesting." He was different. He had downright character. He had brains. He said things that her set never even thought. He had a point of view. These were new things to her. Uncouth, no money, no posi-

Crash !

tion, no prospect of one—but he had brains; and although the clever will sometimes fail to acknowledge brains, the stupid always recognize and pay tribute.

She didn't want to let him go. She wanted his company, his enthusiasms, his illuminations. So she dandled him without Yes or No, and slowly she destroyed him. She gave him days of sheer physical sickness. When he thought of her and her circle, and then of himself and his home at Brixton, and his father, who was a tram-driver, he was sensible at once of shame and of sullen defiance of the girl who shamed him. By her austerity and her pride of breeding she made him always conscious of the blight that he bore. Always she answered him with hints of the differences between their positions, and answered him in that cathedral-lawn accent which was itself a declaration of boundary. She made him abject with a look; shot him back into his pit with some unconscious gesture of mother's drawing-room; degraded him with reticences and refusals; and by her

East of Mansion House

letters made him see himself as she saw him. All the things that had hitherto served him or given him pleasure became suddenly mean or empty. It was as though she pronounced upon him that ultimate blasphemy of man against man—Thou Fool!

Now he worshipped her, and now he hated and despised her slow, set mind; and all the time went writhing in misery inescapable.

Of marrying him she had no thought. When, by a word or a flash, he gave her a sight of the pit he had climbed out of, despite her interest and admiration, the cowardice of her kind forced her to draw back from this creature of darkness. But to let him go . . . Some secret voice forbade this. She felt that he was going to be something, and she wanted to be there when his time came; to be his friend. She felt sure that he would be something serious and distinguished—a Cabinet Minister, perhaps, a great leader of men; and she wanted to be able to say I-knew-him-when—and to show how she had been the inspira-

Crash !

tion and encouragement of his dark days. She was very young.

But he wasn't wearing it. He was no time-server for love or for anything else. Impetuous—that was Freddie all over. After twelve months of agony he settled the matter in twenty seconds at the corner of the dignified road where she lived.

He shot one fierce question. She flummoxed and played for an opening. He didn't offer one; only repeated the shot.

"I can't . . . I don't know . . . I value your friendship, but . . . I think more of you than anybody, but . . . You see, our lives have been so—— You see, father——"

He jerked up his shoulders, opened his mouth and said: "Oh, blast you and your father!" And in a whirl of tattered overcoat he was gone. Round the corner, and down a side-street into the main road, leaving her with face upturned, gazing idiotically at nothing.

He was gone: and gone in such a state that at the theatre he had rows with the touring manager, the resident manager, the

East of Mansion House

electrician, and the star comedian. In the heat of the row he told them all what their mothers were, and the manager returned the compliment, with the added salt of telling him to see the treasurer, and giving him directions to the way out.

He took the money to the nearest bar and had, on the whole, a not-bad evening, and woke in the morning with a soul like last night's cigarette ends. He was despised and rejected. By her attitude towards him she had held him up to a diminishing mirror, and had shown him Freddie Drumpitts as a ludicrous object—a worm, not at home in the earth, squirming its body to the stars.

Crawling out of his back lodging in the early afternoon, thinking of ways to London, where he might bury and forget his shame, he fell in with Billy Hayhoe, a one-time bill-topper, now filling any old booking he could get.

"Freddie, me boy, I'm thinking of America. Vaudeville's busted here. I'm off. What's your best news?"

Freddie told him.

Crash !

"Like that, eh? Well, it's always like that, worse luck. There's always a bit of orange peel waiting for you just as you're getting to the top of the stairs. I've trod on a few bits meself. But now—New York for me. There's chances there, laddie. And if I can't act I can stick bills. Why not turn it up and come along? Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow, and join up with your Uncle Hayhoe."

Freddie made a husky explanation of the state of the funds.

"So? Well, well . . . Look here, laddie, I was going second, but I got enough for two steerages. And two's better'n one on a prospecting trip. If I flop, I'd rather flop in company. And if one of us goes down, t'other might strike something; and if you struck it I should look to you to pull your Uncle up. What about it?"

They went. Billy, on a half-holiday from school; Freddie, bitterly, with a faint thought at the bottom of his mind that some day he'd come back and compel her to acknowledge him; and then delicately turn her down.

East of Mansion House

They crossed. They landed. For a fortnight they were up against it; then Billy Hayhoe got a booking in a vaudeville team touring the smalls, and got Freddie worked in with him as foil and feeder in a cross-talk act.

Together they toured the minor fit-ups, and in the blithe companionship of Billy, and the sights and sounds and encounters of the American tour, Freddie retrieved his heart's ease, and the memory of the Midland girl slowly faded, and the wounds healed. He shed his old skin, and was re-born into something new and strange. He forgot the cruelty of the world in the kindness of people. He found his soul again. And he did something more: he found himself and his life's business.

It happened one evening in a Middle West townlet. Weary of feeding Billy with the same gestures to the same lines, and the same attitude of stage-Society boredom, he worked in a little business, not in the part. Surprised at himself, and the laughs that he got, yet surrendering to this mood of

Crash !

whimsy, he let himself go, to the disgust of Billy, the mild amusement of the orchestra, the applause of the house, and the intense excitement of a Hebrew gentleman in the stalls.

There was trouble behind when they came off. Billy went for him in good style, accusing him of queering the act, and stealing his laughs; of ingratitude, of insubordination, and base unsportsmanship. And Freddie had no answer. He couldn't explain to Billy what had come over him and led him on to break the unwritten laws of stage partnership; he didn't know himself; and while he was floundering for phrases, the Hebrew gentleman, in another part of the wings, was inviting a private pogrom upoh himself.

"I wanta see a man. I gotta see a man."

The stage hand sniffed. "Uh-huh? Don't carry 'em about with me, do I?"

"The man in the last act."

"Warn't no man in the last act."

"Well, the act before, then. ~~I wanta see~~

East of Mansion House

'im. Right now. Do I got to stand 'ere all night talking to a fool, ain't it?"

"Why doncha say what yeh mean, then? You mean Billy Hayhoe."

"Billy Hayhoe me backbone! I mean the lad what feeded to 'im."

Well, Freddie was found at last by the Hebrew gentleman, who pulled him aside and breathed upon him; and when Billy Hayhoe butted in to know what it was all about—he hadn't finished with Freddie's crime—the Hebrew gentleman pushed him in the chest; and when he came back to ask if he was expected to take that sort of thing from a schonk—but by that time the schonk had got Freddie outside the theatre.

You know the rest. You know how Freddie Drumpitts, billed as Frederic Font-hill, made his first appearance in the "legitimate" as the idiot comedian. You know how he turned a dud play into a three-years-full-houses run. You know how his small part of the first night grew until it was the whole play. You know how his fame spread through the world—even to Eng-

Crash !

land. You know how there were Freddie neckties, Freddie collars; how the young men cultivated the Freddie spats and the Freddie lounge; how there were Freddie biscuits, Freddie toothpaste, Freddie cigarettes, Freddie jokes, cartoons of famous politicians as Freddie; Freddie toys, and, in the dancing-rooms, the Freddie Toddle. And you may have heard of Freddie's triumphal return to England, with the full original company, to play his famous part in his own country. I think you must have heard of that royal re-entry, when all England went crazy.

His intention to revisit his old home was splashed on the front pages of the popular dailies, and every leader page carried an article from some member of the I-Knew-Him-When . . . Club. The fact that he had booked his saloon was announced in the evening editions. Stop Press told us that he had boarded the boat. He was really coming. The boat had sailed. At intervals from mid-ocean, wireless messages gave us news of his health, his clothes, his meals,

East of Mansion House

his daily life on board. They even gave hints that the company was with him, and was looking forward to opening in England; and the name of the leading woman was mentioned twice.

No monarch, no victorious general, no triumphal statesman, has received such a reception as the country accorded to Frederic Fonthill. At the port of landing the Mayor of the town put out on a tug to welcome him to England. Pressmen, press photographers, and movie men mobbed him. On the landing-stage half the population of the town awaited him and hugged him and kissed him, and those who could not reach him laughed and cried messages of love to him.

It was the biggest show on earth. The Hebrew gentleman said so.

There was the train journey to town. Special train, rose-decked and bannered. From station to station the news was telephoned, and every platform was alight with waving hats and handkerchiefs and kindly eyes.

Crash !

London! The crowd. The police who fought for his body. The bombardment of the car. The ride through the mad streets to the hotel and the Royal suite that had been booked for him. The voice of London crying him good-will. Something in his throat seemed to choke him. Every moment of it was exultation, and he would have liked to hold each moment in arrest for a month.

The entry of the hotel on the shoulders of his company. The rush upstairs. The drawing-room with balcony windows. The Hebrew gentleman flinging open the windows—"Out on the balcony, me boy. Show yerself!" Billy Hayhoe, his secretary, standing by with the basket of roses presented by the management.

As he stepped on to the balcony he knew that this was what he had lived for. This moment justified him, and made all other things seem paltry. Even in the dark days of advance-agent he had dreamed of something like this as coming to him by right. And it had come. He had made himself

East of Mansion House

heard. His own people had acknowledged him. He thought of the companions of old days, and wondered where they were, and how they fared, and what they thought of him now. Freddie Drumpitts, advance-agent, had slunk out of England by steerage. Mr. Frederic Fonthill, the world-famous comedian, had returned with the glory and the service and the courtesies proper to the great. He was equal with kings. He could smile at the obscure well-to-do. He could smile at his poor early ambitions and disappointments. Everything was at his command. He had money, fame, popularity. All doors were open to him. He could have the best that England could offer without asking; and the world's women came to his feet. With hat off, and that famous head of golden short curls flashing in the sunshine, he smiled and bowed, and held out hands, and threw down roses to his worshippers.

He was no more the infelicitous hot-headed figure of eight years ago. He bore himself as a man of substance and achieve-

Crash !

ment. He could say "gairl" now instead of "gurll." He knew how to sit at dinner tables, how to enter a room, how to chat affably with strangers. He had ceased from serving the pageant; he was of it. He was Frederic Fonthill, the man who had turned the banality of vaudeville into wild poetry. This was his hour.

He had paid for it. God knew with what bitterness he had paid for it. But it was worth it. His pulses were drumming; his face was hot and pale; he was at the topside of bliss. He remembered, as he stood there, that the beginning of it all had been the snobbery of a silly provincial girl. He smiled at the memory. What about it now—eh? Now say I'm not good enough. If I did come out of the slums, what about it now—eh?

Those voices were dumb. All those who had ignored him, who had overpassed him, who had found him wanting in grace, who had rated dullards above him, were now compelled to confess their stupidity and acknowledge him.

East of Mansion House

As he stood smiling upon that floor of warm faces, a small two-seater, diverted to the street at the side of the hotel, passed slowly by. In it were two people—a placid woman in the early thirties and a boy about three years old. The woman was plainly but well dressed in furs. She drove the car with a business-like air. But what drew his attention to her was that she was not looking at the crowd or the hotel; she alone seemed self-absorbed, aloof; and this note of personality emerging from a one-minded crowd grated on him. Only when the car stopped, unable to move farther, did she give a slightly acid glance at the crowd and a pat of irritation. And suddenly the movement, the poise of the head, seemed familiar to him.

Then she turned and he saw her full face.

At this encounter with a plain woman whom he had once found beautiful, he suffered a little thrill of amusement, and with the thrill came a flash of truth. In the moment of wondering that he could ever have loved her, he knew that he never

Crash !

had loved her. What he had loved were the qualities of her world; the world to which he had always aspired and of which he had always lived in awe—the elegance, the confidence, the breed, the assured rightness. But to-day the situation was in his hands. He was now far above her bourgeois circle. He saw her as nothing but a symbol of his life's up-reaching. He could smile upon her now.

He did.

He gave her the world-famous Freddie smile—the smile that had gone to the hearts of aristocrat, middle class, working class, and slum dweller.

And as he smiled she looked up to the balcony. Saw him. Recognised him. Looked from him to the crowd and back again. Then—she raised ever so slightly an eyebrow, made ever so slight a movement of the shoulders. And looked away.

But he caught those two movements. He knew what they were saying: he had seen them before. He was not Frederic Font-hill: he was Freddie Drumpitts—advance-

East of Mansion House

agent for touring revues; and before his eyes danced that provincial town, that road and that big house and assured rightness; and a worm squirming to the stars.

Thou Fool!!

In the middle of this glance the car moved on, and, as it moved, grace, confidence, breed and assured rightness turned their back on him and left him as the centre of a vulgar spectacle—a loud-mouthed Mob cheering a Mountebank.

Five minutes later the Hebrew gentleman was using his hands to the company and a group of pressmen in the back room.

“Would yeh believe it? I ask yeh? I ask yeh? After all this—biggest thing that ever happened—Napoleon—Lincoln—Wellington—after all this—there 'e is—the crowd outside shoutin' for 'im—there 'e is—sitting there all alone—laughin'!”

VI—A SPOT OF WATER

VI

A SPOT OF WATER

AFTER a yesterday of fumbled business and testy encounters, carried over by a sleepless night, Josiah Cleemput stood in the bar of the Pealing Bells trying to drown a sorrow that had learned to swim. His head was a fly-cage, and his soul was suffering with prickly heat. He was about at the end of things.

He was a failure. He knew it, and Stewpony knew it, and Stewpony talked about it. After all his years of industry and denial he was a failure, while the slapdash George, who started equal with one shop, had now eight shops, a big house, two cars, and was mayor for the second time. Enough to make a fellow sick. Josiah, upright, clean-living, and (until lately) tee-

East of Mansion House

total, a failure; Scollick, the grasshopper, lover of wine and horses and life's lighter side, and pursuer of his shop-girls, a resounding success. Old George was taken seriously, and his tritest sayings weighed and debated. Nobody looked at Josiah in the street, and if he spoke in company his voice failed to carry, and nobody listened. They didn't even sneer at him: they ignored him, or accepted him and his failure as they accepted the lamp-posts.

He was a nobody, one of life's misfits. He had a comedian's face and figure—wispy and bird-like, with facetious eyebrows—and a soul whose god was dignity and austerity. You had but to look at him to know that he would fail in everything he undertook—even in the final forlorn tussle with fortune from which most failures are permitted to snatch some makeshift trophy. Fatuous and frustrated, he fronted the corn of the world with fine thoughts and spineless ideals. He saw himself as Jack the Giant Killer, facing hordes of enemies; the martyr stoned by the materialist. His battle

A Spot of Water

with old George had lasted long, and he knew that intelligent people, people of penetration, weighing the two, would have seen him as the hero of it. But there weren't any people of penetration in Stew-pony, and he couldn't even *feel* a hero. He could only see himself as his immediate world saw him.

What a world! Brrr! The fitness of things! "Gimme a double, miss."

That George. . . . He found it impossible to conceive that anywhere in England a more obnoxious creature existed. He couldn't get away from Scollick. Wherever he went, Scollick's advertisements hit his eye and praise of Scollick hit his ear. In a great city a man may avoid his enemy, but in a small town he stands at every corner. But hate and contempt are sorry satisfaction when you can't hurt or insult the enemy. Old George wasn't conscious of being hated or deserving hate; was so securely set in men's esteem that he wouldn't have believed Josiah's hate if he had been told. He was a business man, and if he had beaten poor

East of Mansion House

old Josiah Cleemput, that was only part of the business game. At their beginning he had seen Cleemput as the only serious rival, and had gone out to match him, living up to and, later, beyond him; getting better goods, cutting his prices, dressing his windows with American display, and using all the latest notions in publicity and salesmanship. Had he been outdone by Cleemput he would have borne no ill-will—business was business.

But Cleemput, empty of the business instinct and living with failure, nursed ill-will and fed on it, until he saw their competition as a grand dramatic conflict. Most cruel of all to his quivering nerves was old George's full-blooded magnanimity, and his "Hard luck, ole man. Little more ginger in the first two years and you'd have had me down!" The man never seemed to realise how odious his success was. He was so damned friendly. If he'd kept out of the way, lofty and self-sufficient, it wouldn't have been so bad. But he was just the same to-day as he had been in the

A Spot of Water

beginning—bright and breezy to everybody. He would have been bright and breezy on the top steps of Zion. What had been a game to him had been life or death to Josiah, and now the thumbs were down. Josiah thought of old George when he first woke up; he thought of him all day; he thought of him last thing at night; and he dreamt of him.

And now, not satisfied with having crushed him and drawn his livelihood away, this magnificent mass of success had sent a man (hadn't even come himself: had Sent a Man) to make an offer to buy him out. That's why Josiah was now drinking doubles in the Pealing Bells.

Buy out his business, eh? Buy him out in front of all the town, eh? *His* business! A useless thing, perhaps; a perpetual fret and grind; but he'd grown up with it, grown grey with it, and—— Grr! His whisky had a brown taste of gall.

Arm on the counter, head down, he stood gazing into a little spot of water on the polished mahogany. It reflected the light

East of Mansion House

of the windows as a crystal, and held the room in little: a tiny room with doll's house furniture, and the white clouds of the June morning moving across the pane. As he gazed into it he saw faintly the reflection of a corner of the square, caught through the open door—a microcosm of Stewpony; and in it he saw, point by point, his battle with old George. It was all there in that little spot of water, all his life's mischance.

In another corner the barmaid, blonde and banal, talked with a customer. "Old George going across the square. He's a lad, ain't he?"

"Ah, thassabout what 'e is!"

"Yuh! Thassabout the only word for him, eh?"

"Yuh! A fair lad. Hear about that new girl he picked up at Clutterfield?" Mumble, mumble, mumble.

"No, reely? Did he? He is a One, ain't he? Nice sort of mayor, eh?"

"Still, he's a lad, eh?"

"Oh, he's a lad all right. No getting away from it. The way he does things!"

A Spot of Water

"Ah, thassit! He's got a way with him. An' the things he says, eh? And yet they all like him, eh?"

"Ah, it's that way he's got! Thassabout it."

There they left him, satisfied that they had pierced his complexity. But Josiah had another double, and continued to gaze into the spot of water and brood. Blast him! If he could only see him go bust. If he could just once knock him off his perch. If he could just once see him sprawling ignobly on his back. Lots of people would have liked to put him on the floor before now and kick some of the swank out of him. If he could go up and ask him: "I say, George, don't you ever wake up in the middle of the night and wonder if you're quite such a devil of a feller as you think you are?" Something like that, eh? Or, better still, if he could get his hands on him—just once assert himself and make old George squeal, make the big lump see Josiah Cleemput seriously for once. It'd be a grand moment.

East of Mansion House

He sipped his whisky, and found that it no longer warmed him. His temples were throbbing. That little crystal on the counter was making his eyes ache, but he continued to gaze into it and brood.

Supposing he did! Supposing he did go for old George—really go for him—make a scene and send him sprawling? Eh? That'd make 'em sit up. That'd show 'em that Josh wasn't the poor thing they all thought him. Wouldn't it be worth it—to have his hands on that jolly face, his fingers round that neck? Those sneers, those motors, those eight shops—all built up and laid out as one grand taunt at a beaten rival. If ever a man had been worked up to——

Through the whisky cloud for one moment wisdom peeped. He saw himself suddenly with old George lying bruised and still before him. Eugene Aram. He shuddered, and his comic sense awoke. Josh Cleemput a murderer! It was too funny. Don' be a fool. Killin' a man 'cos 'e got on and you ain't. What next? What

A Spot of Water

if he does give you the laugh, eh? Nice thing, if we was all to go about killing ev'body who laughs at us, eh? Silly ass!

But the cloud closed on him again, and the vision of old George at his feet took romantic colour. He was quite sensible, quite; it would be a horrid thing to do. But when you thought of that George, the way he kept running against you in the street, and chi-iking you, and offering you lifts in his motor, and—and—it was enough to work a feller up to——

And on top of it all, after ten years of it—this. This offer to buy him out. This—— The thought fell upon him like a drop of sealing-wax. It burned him as though he had only just heard of it, and it continued to burn and crackle, and bring tears to his eyes. He dropped lower over the counter, his eyes staring until the little spot of water grew and blotted out the bar.

Buy him out, eh? And go about saying: "Well, I bought up poor little Cleemput's show. That finishes him." Finishes him,

East of Mansion House

eh? Does it? See about that. See who's finished. Now, then, Mister Mayor!

He stopped on the step outside the Pealing Bells, and wiped his face. For some seconds the square danced before him and gaped. Then he was sober. His face resolved itself. His eyes became steady. He went slowly and straightly across the square to the line of George's shops.

"Is he in?"

He was led through a clerks' office and down a long passage which ended in a mahogany door. He noted the long passage and approved it. Old George sat in a leather arm-chair at a large pedestal desk. He swung round genially. "Hallo, Josh! 'Owst things? Have a cigar? No? Well, thought it over?"

"No, I haven't. I just dropped in for a talk, like."

"Good. No good doing things in a hurry—eh?"

"Sometimes it's best. One puts off and puts off too long, sometimes."

"Ah, jesso, jesso. Get a thing done, I say."

A Spot of Water

"That's right. Like now, fr instance." At the sharp tone old George looked up. He looked up into a white, strained face and idiotic eyes. As he saw the look in those eyes his right hand moved to the bell on his desk. But it never got there. The wrist was caught by Josh's left hand, and before George could rise or struggle the right hand was buried in his neck, and his head was forced back to the rail of the chair. Then all the accumulated venom of years was poured upon him.

"This is what I come to talk about. This! See? Yew—yew buy me up—eh? After all these years! Oh, you been mighty big, George, but it's my turn now. See? You've had your run, Mister Blooming Mayor!" The big head rolled; the mouth tried to say: "Josh! Josh!" The face went blue. "Look down on me, doncha? Always have—eh? I'm nobody, am I? I'm down and out—eh? Buy me up, eh? Laugh at me, doncha? Well, laugh now, you lump!" Both hands went to the throat. His arms swung to and fro, and the great head

East of Mansion House

swung with them. It was the first hard exercise he had had for years, but it came surprisingly easy. He'd got him now. George couldn't laugh now. Go on, funny face—laugh. Laugh! But there were only faint struggles—gurgles—beating of the air—goggle eyes begging for mercy. Then, as he held on and pressed, the mass dropped from his hands across the chair, collapsed, and slid to the floor with a foolish bump.

Josh stood and looked at it, breathing hard. Who was the failure now—ch? Who was the fool now? Look at him! 'Strordinary how easy it had been. He didn't feel a bit sorry. Not a bit. There was old George, quite still and silent.

From the long passage came the sound of steps. The steps were approaching the door. He turned sharply from the desk, and then—then he was netted head and foot in horror. The sleek, sunny room was suddenly filled with a cloud of fear. It got into his stomach, into his hands, into his joints—it was all round him. Through it the chair, the desk, the carpet, the telephone,

A Spot of Water

the bell, all glimmered with character. They were not as other furniture; their very shadowiness expressed the sinister occasion. They were horrid presences that had lived with horror.

He went swiftly to the door. The door flew back on him. A girl blocked the way. "Why? Whatever——"

Panic inspired him. "Oh, heard me call—eh? He's had a fit. D'you know first aid? I'll get Doctor Belford." He streaked past her and down the long passage.

But he was scarcely in the street before many noises came from the shop, and three assistants were at the main door. "Hi! Hey! Hey—you! Cleemput!" The cry seemed to be right at his ear, and without thought, abandoned to the instinct of the blood, he ran. And as he ran there grew behind him that noise that strikes the boldest with terror—the noise of hue-and-cry, when every living thing bends itself to the capture of one. His feet went mad. His chest went hot and tight. He wanted to be sick. From the

East of Mansion House

square he turned into his home street, and as he turned he saw behind him a trail of men, women, children, dogs and a constable. The cries grew stronger and fuller. He saw himself in the middle of the mob. His body felt their hands upon it, felt his clothes being torn from him, his limbs being twisted by furious men.

Oh, God, what a fool he'd been! That was the only phrase that came to him. He hadn't been wicked; he'd been a fool. Why? What had old George done to him? Nothing. Jealousy—that's what it was. Nothing but jealousy. And because of it he'd done this thing. But they wouldn't have him. He hadn't known why he had run this way, but now he saw superior guidance in his direction. Before him was the level crossing of the Midland. If he could reach that. . . . The Manchester express would be along within the next minute; already he could see its balls of smoke beyond the trees. If he could get ahead of that . . .

"Hey! Hey!" Close behind him now

A Spot of Water

came their cries. He could hear the plunk of their feet. With a tearing breath and a thrust of his leaden legs he hurled himself forward.

"Hey! Hi! You! Cleemput!" A big hand smacked on his shoulder.

He swung under it, swerved, and shot his hands at a throat, and gripped it tight. The throat writhed and struggled, but he had him, and they went to the ground. Then they were all about him, and he was conscious of a mob and of many hands upon him, and of blows and clamour. But he kept his grip, and only when a foot took him in the neck did they get him away.

As three men dragged him up and held him by arms and collar, he looked round, blinking and gasping. He looked round at the saloon bar of the Pealing Bells; at the white face of the barmaid; at the counter and at the spot of water; at the men who were holding him; at the dead body of old George on the floor. The man who held him by the collar was talking. "Ar,

East of Mansion House

Standin' at the bar, 'e was, staring down at the counter. An' old George come in, and smacked 'im on the back. An' 'e turns round and flies at 'im, an'—an'—an' does *that!* "

VII—THE TOP OF THE STAIRS

VII

THE TOP OF THE STAIRS

THE white metal clock on the mantelpiece of the gleaming kitchen gave seven weak tings, and Mrs. Dudley chewed her lips and looked at it as though it had done her an injury. She looked at the door with the same glint. At her hands in her lap. At the fire-place. At Reuben's coat hanging on a nail. She twisted her fingers and glared. It seemed that she was about to fall upon every object in the kitchen and wrestle with it until it granted her right to consideration. But she didn't.

She sat still and looked out of the window. The kitchen was small and neat; a cameo of comfort; but it looked out on a wilderness. It looked out on a land of steam and wheels and smoke-stacks and

East of Mansion House

abandoned mines. Pit-shafts gloomed through the mist, and dynamos throbbed and hammers rang. Squabs of grass, wounded by iron-dust, made sad colour among rockeries of broken bricks and scrapped masonry. The brown twigs of the hedges dripped unceasing brown rain. From across the singed fields, where yellow smoke went writhing, one heard the voices of engines and the yelping of whippets, but no voice of man. Only the dogs and the wheels denied the thought that Boazeley by Clutterfield was a village of destruction surrendered to the conquering smoke.

On the horizon, against the clouding sky, the chimneys of Clutterfield waved banners of flame, and one saw the craggy terraces of the town through a roaring cloud of smoke and steam and sunset. Through the kitchen window came persistently, day and night, the surge and throb of the town and the squall of hooters. From dawn to dawn the movements of its insane symphony repeated themselves, now taken up here, now there; beating against the outer hills with a

The Top of the Stairs

grandiloquence of noise; lashing and swirling in little eddies or rising in concerted waves.

• • • • •

But Mrs. Dudley wasn't noticing these things. She was looking at herself, and feeling more and more sorry for herself.

Her marriage with Reuben Dudley, surface-man at the Boazeley Workings, had been no matter of flame and lightning. Both had been there before; and, anyway, they don't, in the Black Country, dress their love with delicacy or glamour. They knew what they were about, and each felt that they would get on together. She was the heavy sort, content with wifely duties, and a good manager with money. He was sanguine and easy-going, asking little beyond a full plate at meal-times and a docile mate. So, after a few tentative week-ends, economy suggested a general home, and he brought her and her furniture and her seventeen-year-old Maudie from Clutterfield to Boazeley, and announced a second marriage.

East of Mansion House

And they would have got on together if it hadn't been for that kid of his, that Joan. But her——

The little brat! All he thought of was her. Never took a bit of notice of Mrs. Dudley's Maudie. Not a bit. And when she urged him to notice what a fine girl Maudie was growing, he'd say: "Ur? Ey, but she ain't got Joan's eyes, 'as she, Joan?" Just doted on that thin-legged Joan. There was nobody like her for him. Anybody would think she had just stepped out of heaven. She was Dad's Girl, moving in an aura of benediction and loaded with caresses. He would even say in front of Mrs. Dudley and her Maudie, proudly and with thoughtless indelicacy: "Ey, but she gits more like 'er mother every day."

His last thought in the morning before starting out was to go to Joan's room and say good-bye; and his first word in the evening was: "Where's Joan? . . . Ey, there y'are, lass." He would bring in packets of sweets for Joan; never one for Maudie. He would talk and play with Joan all through

The Top of the Stairs

an evening, never a word for Maudie, though Maudie frisked around him, demurely flirtatious, seeking sweets and attentions that she never got. Only, sometimes, he would give her a cold, sidelong look, as though he had never seen her before.

But that afternoon he had crowned everything by coming home early and taking Joan in her best frock to Sanger's Circus, that had pitched just outside Clutterfield, without a word or a nod to her or Maudie. There they were—him* and his brat—enjoying themselves, and here were Mrs. Dudley and Maudie: mother in the kitchen raging, Maudie in the parlour crying with wounded pride.

He treated them as second fiddles. That's what they were—second fiddles. And it hurt. That brat—of some other woman's making—took front place all the time. It made her bilious to see all his love lavished on the silly-looking brat, and him treating Maudie, with her fine colour and black curls, as though she was nothing. She could never speak to Reuben of his girl as

East of Mansion House

"Joan," but always as "that gel of yours." Before the marriage she had hardly noticed the child, but her attitude now was positive. At her first introduction as wife, the brat had shrunk from her, the movement saying: "You're a stepmother." That had stung, and her heart had replied: "All right, ducky. If that's the way you take me . . ."

Like her mother. . . . Yes, that was the enemy in this house—that other woman whose ghost moved always with them in the shape of Joan. Day by day Mrs. Dudley would look at the child, and think with blind anger of the mother who had first known Reuben's caresses, and would try to conceive some picture of the woman from the child, until now she could see the woman's face in Joan's, and longed to break it.

At first this feeling had been subconscious; the half-aversion of every stepmother to the other woman's child; but it was soon a perceived state of hostility. This pecky thing that he so much adored was to him a symbol, part of those lost years of his

The Top of the Stairs

of which she could know nothing, when he had been happy and lusty without her. The brat was another woman's gift to him, and she glowered upon it as she would have glowered upon a discovered love-letter. Never could she keep the stepmother tone out of her voice, or the stepmother look out of her eyes.

The more she thought and the more she looked, the more she longed to attack—to compel to herself and to Maudie some of the affection and care that Reuben heaped upon Joan. But she could see no way. She could only content herself with sour voice and vehement eyes; and daily the kitchen was hot with her and Maudie's snarls and bickerings against Reuben's darling.

And now—to take his brat off to the circus, and never a word to either of them, when he might have known that Maudie had never seen a circus. . . . To go off——

There were steps in the passage. Mrs. Dudley wrung her hands, got up, gave the fire a stab, sat down again. Reuben and Joan came in—Reuben all grins, Joan

East of Mansion House

flushed with adventure. He stood in the doorway and said: "Ey . . ." Mrs. Dudley said: "Ey . . ." Joan stood on one leg, eating coconut and sparkling.

He said: "Ey, 'twas a gran' circus. She won't sleep to-night, thinking of it." Behind them, silently, Maudie crawled into the room, and leaned against the doorway glowering. He turned and looked at her, and said: "Ey . . . Maudie."

There was a silence. Then Mrs. Dudley spoke, and her thick, amiable voice had a crack in it. "Well!"

"Ey?"

"Well, what did ya bring Maudie?"

His mouth opened, and for a moment he stared. Then he hit the air with his hand.

"Why, there now—I never give it a thought."

Then he grinned and rumped Maudie's hair, and turned her face up.

"Ey, I never give it a thought that a big girl like 'er 'd want coconuts and fairings. Gettin' too big, she is, for that sorta thing. Gettin' a woman now. 'Ere, Joan, give

The Top of the Stairs

Maudie some of ya walnuts and a bit of ya coconut. I'm going out to yard to see to dogs." He went out through the back.

Joan dug into her coat-pocket and held out to Maudie half a coconut and a handful of walnuts. Maudie took them. She looked at them. She looked at Joan, and back at the nuts. Then, with a vicious swing, she flung them straight at Joan's face. The walnuts broke round her and scattered into the fire-place. The coconut took her on the cheek and left a red circle. At the impact of it, Joan crouched, clapped hands to her face, and with a whimper of protest slunk dog-like out of the room. They heard her creeping slowly upstairs. As she went, Maudie kicked the door after her; then kicked the coconut across the room; then sat down at the table and knuckled her eyes. Mrs. Dudley said nothing, but her face was a beetroot, and her hands were working, and her lips. Presently, Maudie looked up gulping. "It's—it's too—it's—— She's—she's—— The way he——"

Mrs. Dudley soothed her darling. "I

East of Mansion House

know, ducky. I know. It's enough to make you—— It makes me think I— dunno—what. Never mind, precious. You git up to bed. 'Im and me'll 'ave an understanding before long. We can't go on like this. I've put up with about enough. 'Im and 'is Joan!" With words and hands she comforted her, and soon the darling went up to bed. Mrs. Dudley sat down again and thought. How could she get at the fool? What was there that she could say to the fool to make him understand things? Nothing. He was a thick-headed fool. Not that it was him so much; it was the brat who was the mischief, leading him on with her mother's eyes and dangling round him for fuss and fondling; taking him away from his proper duty as husband and step-father, and making no secret of her hate of Maudie and Mrs. Dudley. But there— talking was no good: if she could only *do* something to turn his thoughts from the brat, something that would make him see her as they saw her. Ey, she was like her mother, sure enough—one of those spoony

The Top of the Stairs

sort that catch the men. If she could get her out of the way, or——

Her mind was a mist, pricked with red. Her soft, amiable face was hardened by cruel thoughts—the cruel thoughts of the kind heart that is set wholly upon the righting of one wrong. She chewed her lips, and patted her knees, and round and round her heart ran the blood of all stepmothers. If only she could think of something—make something happen to her that would look as though it had happened naturally: some sort of accident; something that would set him against her. Perhaps, then, he'd have an eye to spare for Maudie, and a bit of attention for both of them. Perhaps. . . .

She had reached that far when Reuben came in from tending his dogs. He gave her a half-glance, and began to talk about the dogs. Had he been alert, he would have noted her agitation: long ago he would have noted her sharp manner to Joan. But he was a man who took everything for granted: even the obvious had to be indicated. And she—had she been less clouded in venom,

East of Mansion House

she might have noted a queerness of manner in him—a certain lift and expectancy. He washed at the sink and spoke over his shoulder.

“Just go round 'fore they close—'ave yarn with lads. Don't wait up. Gorn t'bed, 'ave they?”

“‘M.”

“Ah. . . . Right.”

That was all, and he went out to the passage, putting on his coat as he went. A few seconds later she heard the door slam. He was gone. Him! His brat! Damn him!

If only there were some way.

She sought help from the cupboard; made herself a cup of tea with “something” in it, and took it to the fire-place, and sat simmering. The tea and the something soothed her a little, and released her thoughts, and soon queer fancies went rustling about that spick-and-span kitchen, to and fro, hovering round her, but never near enough for capture. Her eyes roamed after them, and roaming, found the fire-place and the litter of walnuts. Walnut-

The Top of the Stairs

shells. . . . She seemed to remember some old story about walnut-shells. Something, wasn't it, about a woman who—— But, no; she couldn't remember. She had a second cup, and upon this second cup followed a thickening of thought; and then a curdling.

So she sat, all droop and amiability; large, round face, stout figure, big, warm hands, easy eyes. Not the woman for ~~these~~ thoughts; but there she sat, thinking quietly and without shivers about all sorts of things. Planning, too, just how they could be done. In this quiet, respectable house she sat planning things that you only read about in the Sunday papers as happening to or being performed by creatures of another world, as far removed from your experience as the dock of the Old Bailey from the imagination of Mrs. Dudley.

And then—at last, she found it. Out of the muzzy exaltation of anger and disgust it came so swiftly that she wondered how she hadn't thought of it at first. There was the stuff right at hand in the scullery. It would be easy to do. An accident it would

East of Mansion House

be. But how? How would she explain it? She twisted her stout fingers, and light came. Something like this:

"There's bin an accident happened to that girl of yours. Playing with the lamp in 'er room. I'm always telling 'er about it. Knocked it over the bed and set fire to 'er-self. Might a-burnt us all alive. Set fire to 'erself—and—ooh. It's awful. You'll 'ave to git 'er into some place."

That's how she'd tell him—sorrowfully, with the air of one who had done her best against hostile circumstance. With that settled, she went to the scullery and brought something back with her, and set it on the table and looked at it. That'd make a picture of the brat. Like her mother—eh? That'd give him something to fuss over.

She stretched out her hand to it, and was about to pick it up, when she stopped, with fingers open. At first she did not know why she had stopped; then she was aware of a feeling of something unusual in the air. Something she'd forgotten to do, perhaps. She tried to think what it was—puzzled

The Top of the Stairs

herself to locate it. Back door locked? Yes. Windows fastened? Yes. Was it . . . Of course, that's what it was. It was a low noise, a noise persistent through the beating of the engines and the droning of the wheels: a sort of muffled sobbing. She recognised it then and relaxed her arm and her attention. It was only the brat upstairs. Little Misery. Snivelling to herself because of Maudie's flare-up. She was always at it after words with Maudie; snivelling for sympathy. Let her snivel. But it meant that she wasn't asleep yet. One would have to wait.

She waited, listening. There was nothing in the noise to worry about; she had heard it many times before. Yet, somehow, to-night she did worry. It seemed that there was some new note in the noise, and when she was sensible of a difference she tried to perceive in what way it was different. Perhaps it wasn't, after all. Perhaps it was just fancy. Perhaps she had had a stronger go in her tea than she had thought, and was worked up a bit and all that.

East of Mansion House

Nervy-like. But no—there *was* something queer about it. Something sharper than the brat's ordinary snivelling. It didn't seem to be quite the same; but though she listened with her whole body, her brain wouldn't respond. She got up. She went into the scullery, looking about her. She went to the parlour and stood listening. She opened the front door and listened. She looked into corners. She padded about from front room to back, a worried animal. She felt as she had felt the night her first husband was brought home on a stretcher. What was it? Why couldn't she place it? But she heard only the crepitation of the spent cinders in the stove, and the sobbing, while conscious that there was something alien in the air which she ought to recognize and couldn't.

Oh, never mind. Let it go. Main thing was for the brat to go to sleep. She poured herself another cup, and waited, fearful lest Reuben should return before the accident had happened; and at last, after some twenty minutes, there was silence upstairs

The Top of the Stairs

and throughout the house—a silence so full that it hurt the ears.

She reached again to the thing on the table; and now she picked it up, and now she was out of the kitchen, and now she was at the foot of the stairs; and now she was going softly up; and now she was on the landing. She stood for a moment, breath held, and bent to the keyhole of the brat's door and listened; then stretched her fingers to the handle. She had just reached it, and was turning it, when through the darkness and silence came a sound that was like the shot of a gun—the creak of a loose floor-board. With a jerk of the breath she started back, and the jerk ended on a high scream that was heard all over Boazeley.

For in that moment she knew just what it was about that sobbing that had eluded her. And it was the last thing she knew, for in starting back her foot slipped on the top stair, and she went backwards to the bottom. From the corner of the landing, Reuben, whose foot had trodden the loose board, saw her fall.

VIII—ADVENTURE

VIII

ADVENTURE

HE stood at the window of one of the big shipping offices in Cockspur Street. He was a nondescript figure, shabby in such a way that nobody would have noticed he was shabby. Nobody would have noticed him at all. His overcoat was six years old; his boots were turned over. His hair when last cut had been cut by a back-street barber who had left little tufts where they should not be. His trousers bagged far out from the knee. His hands were clasped in front of him and the fingers were wrestling with each other, and his sharp nose was almost on the glass. You would have said from his figure that his age was round about forty, and it was; though his face was the keen, simple face of an awkward youth.

The window at which he gazed was

East of Mansion House

dressed in the fashion of other shipping-office windows. There were models of liners, placards showing enchanting vistas of foreign ports, lists of vessels and their sailing dates, and little pyramids of pamphlets and fare tables. And he stared and stared at them, as hungry men stare at restaurant windows. Cockspur Street was off his homeward way, which was from Bedford Street to Stockwell; but every evening he crossed Trafalgar Square and spent some fifteen minutes moving from window to window and staring. For years this had been his custom, and would be for years more, unless . . .

Unless that hunger were appeased; the hunger for travel, adventure, movement and encounter, which come so seldom to bookkeepers who have always been bookkeepers. The very sight of those model liners moved his blood as music or pictures move other people. The sight of the boat train leaving Victoria filled him with yearning. The reading of a book of travel or exploration or escape kept him awake

Adventure

all night. In the late evenings, after his tea, he called regularly at a quiet little public house in a side street of Stockwell, and there he had often listened to the tales of young men who had been at the war. Stirring stuff! And he an inspiring listener who brought out their best. His face gave them clamorous applause; and at the end of each tale he made one quiet comment. "Ah!" and a sigh. "Ah! That's an adventure I'd a-liked to have. I'd a-loved to gone about and Done Things. But I don't know. . . . Other fellows seem to get these chances, but nothing ever happens to me. What you was saying about India—being stalked by a tiger—I'd a-loved to have had that experience. It must a-been grand."

"Oh, I dunno. Anyway, you don't need to go abroad for adventure. You can get it wherever you are if you ask for it. Try knocking a copper's helmet off."

"Ah, you don't understand what I mean."

• • • • •

Nobody did. Nor did he ever try to make them. He only knew that there

East of Mansion House

burned in him—always had burned in him—this desire for strange seas and desperate enterprise which filled him with shame when he looked at himself in the mirror. Adventure never came to people like him. Great things happened to other men. They went abroad. They saw fresh scenes. They had dealings with things he had only read about. They saw palms and pavilions and white beaches and ice-bound channels and blue mountain-tops. They had battles with hurricanes, journeys over snow, struggles with fierce animals and savage men: things that he would never know. Always he would be a bookkeeper in Bedford Street; and adventure never beckoned to bookkeepers.

He moved slowly from Cockspur Street like a child taken away from his toys, and went at his usual pace down Whitehall, across Broadway and along Millbank. The month was March, and the evening held the cold, uncertain light of the labouring Spring. The sky was hard and clear. Along the river the lamps were already

Adventure

lit and made ghostly presences in the lingering day. In that light they seemed wrong, almost unclean. About the river were boats and barges and little tugs. He stopped to look at them; they were Going Somewhere. If one could get on one of them and go down to the docks, and then get on a tramp and go out of the Thames, and——

He walked on, and across Vauxhall Bridge, and slowly the dusk came down; and as it came down it got into his brain and set him making up a foolish story of adventure in which he was the principal figure, who suffered greatly, and Did Things. There was something in the air to-night that gave him ideas; the adventure was more firmly wrought and more crowded than his usual imaginings. Vauxhall Bridge, in the dusk, was frankly and beautifully Vauxhall Bridge, but to his untrained mind Vauxhall Bridge was not good enough. He made it a bridge at Buda-Pesth, and, taking liberties with geography, made Doulton's tower a campanile, and the Victoria Tower a Norwegian cathedral,

East of Mansion House

and Lambeth Palace a part of the Escorial, and the arches of the South Western Railway were some queer corner of the lower part of Mozambique or Tamatave in Madagascar. These names thrilled him. On a night like this, in a place like that, anything might happen. The little streets of Tamatave (that ran from South Lambeth Road into Kennington) might hold nameless perils or the sweet and potent spells of countries behind the moon. An open door, a lighted window, an arm raised from the sill; and who knows where it might end? Somewhere down there in the darkness, in one of those strange houses, his passport to adventure might be waiting. A knock at the door, a chance word, and beauty and high endeavour might be his. Just one casual encounter, and——

A girl, passing, looked into his face and smiled. "Going for a walk in the park, son?"

He turned his face away, dropped his eyes, pulled his coat round him, and changed his pace to a stride. Then resumed his tale.

Adventure

Any one of those houses—any one. Queer things, houses. Dumb; and yet they looked as if they could speak and tell queer stories. Any one of them might hold adventure when you came to think of it. Supposing one got, say, to Odessa, and went out of the station and down a side turning, and opened the first unfastened door one came to, and went in. What then? Something, certainly. Something strange and moving; something different from Stockwell and Bedford Street. Suppose this was the side-street in Odessa, and that house opposite, all dark but with a light in the top room, were the house; and suppose one——

At that point adventure thrust out a finger and lightly touched him and beckoned him to follow.

Out of the recesses of a yard, whose entrance he was passing, came a hiss, a series of hisses; the soft noise with tongue and teeth by which street boys attract attention. He stopped short, startled, and went hot, as he always did when spoken to suddenly. He peered into the mauve shadow of the

East of Mansion House

yard. In it he could just discern the figure of a man—a little man in shirt and trousers. His braces hung behind him, and he was supporting the trousers with his hands, arms out. His hair was tousled. The face could not be seen, but in that situation the figure and attitude held a hint of something that turned the bookkeeper's stomach. What lay behind him in the yard, whether sheds or houses or emptiness, could not be seen, and before the bookkeeper could begin guessing the hiss was repeated, and then a low whistle.

"Sst!" And then, "Oyl!" And then, softly, "Mister! Oyl 'Alf a mo!"

"Eh?"

"'Ere. 'Alf a mo. I want yeh."

"What?"

"Come in a minute. I can't come outa the yard like this. I want yeh."

"Want me? Er—what——"

"Come in!" The voice was husky, but urgent. "I want ya. It's serious. Reely." He took one hand from his trousers and

Adventure

waved it, miming seriousness. "'Ere—guv'nor. I say——"

"Well—er—what is it? Why don't you tell me what you want?" There was a quaver in his tone.

"I can't. Not 'ere. Come 'ere a minute. I want yeh!"

He turned away, confused. "I—I'm sorry. I—I'm in a hurry. I can't stop. I——"

"No, but, mister—— My missus——"

And then, as he turned away, he saw that the horrid, crouching figure was moving towards him out of the yard; and as it moved it began to run. His body went cold, and his face blue. "Here! Oy!"

But he waited for no more. In that moment the yard seemed to fill itself with a cloud of fear that shrouded unnameable things. With one look behind him, he turned and ran, and ran down South Lambeth Road until his chest told him that he must stop. Mercifully he heard no following feet, and, looking back when near the Swan, he saw a vague thing with two

East of Mansion House

strings hanging behind it slink back into the yard.

• • • • •

He hurried home to his lodgings in Studley Road, and when he got there he found himself stirred up and shaking. He sat down; but he could not settle to his tea. The incident overclouded every corner of his mind. It was lucky that he'd had sense enough to run. It was smart of him to be dignified and determined and not stop to debate the matter. A silly fellow would have stopped and listened to the man, and got into conversation, and into God knows what afterwards. Chances were that he'd had a narrow escape from a very nasty affair. He was almost going in when the man called; almost. If the man hadn't run at him, he would; and then, who knows what might have happened? The yard—he had never noticed it before; but the horror of it, the sheer horror of its dusk and that figure. What did he want? What game was he up to? Some nasty game, you might be sure, from his secrecy and his con-

Adventure

dition, and being in that place. If he hadn't run he might have been in the thick of it by now; might even have been dead. You never knew. Queer things happened in London. He saw that yard as a cavern mouth, the lair of desperate men. At the thought that he might have got mixed up in some criminal affair his back went cold and then caught fire.

There might have been a gang of them who wanted him in there to cover up some doing of their own. He remembered a play he had seen called *The Silver King*, where a man had been made drunk and left with a dead body and suspected of the murder.

They might have got him into a dark house or a dark shed down there, and done all sorts of things to him. You could be attacked in horrible ways in a dark house—maimed, perhaps, for life, or disfigured.

Or they might have tried to get him in there to play cards for a lot of money, and follow him about and wait outside his house for weeks until he had paid.

East of Mansion House

Or there might have been a private row on, and the police would have come in, and he would have been drawn into it as one of them, and taken to court and his name and story printed in the papers for people to laugh at his disgrace.

Or it might have been one of those gangs that he had read about that would get you drunk and make you do something, and then blackmail you and terrorise you all your life.

You never knew. It was just in ways like that, getting into talk with queer people, that men got drawn into messes that they never heard the last of. Supposing he had been fool enough to answer that man and go into the yard—it might have been the end of everything that made life agreeable. He might never have known another minute's peace.

The way the man had run at him. . . .

Clearly he had some guilty secret that he wanted to share or dispose of; anybody in his senses could see that by his manner. Speaking about his "missus" was, of course,

Adventure

a blind. These crooks used any trick to get hold of people.

Think of the dirty business that might have happened—a dead woman—perhaps a dead child—perhaps a hoard of stolen goods that they wanted to leave him with. Perhaps——

Ugh! He tried to shake off the memory, but it wouldn't go. He felt too queer to take his usual glass at the little place round the corner, and at last, to escape from its oppression, he took down a book describing a journey from China to Lhasa in disguise.

That was six months ago. And now, whenever he is in company where adventures are spoken of, his eye lights up, he nods wisely, and he thrusts a finger into the group with: "Ahl—talking of adventures reminds me. You don't need to go abroad for adventures. London's full of 'em. Give you an instance." Then, with the ring of self-conviction in his voice: "I had an adventure some time back. In an empty house. Not far from here, neither. Really,

East of Mansion House

it's a wonder I'm alive to-day. I was coming down Vauxhall Bridge Road when a man came out of a yard. It was night, mind you, and dark. He came out of a yard and called me. I went in. And he took me to an empty house in that yard. And when he struck a match, I see on the floor of the downstairs room, the body of a woman, bleeding from the throat. He never spoke. Then two other men come in and they never spoke neither. Well, when they came in I saw there was going to be trouble, and I turned to do a bunk. And then the match went out and they came for me. Three of 'em. In the dark. I shall never forget that struggle as long as I live. Have one with me, and I'll tell you about it."

IX-D O W

IX

D O W

AFTER many years of patient striving against colour-prejudice, Matthew Mark Mohammed Dow had come to be highly respected in Clutterfield. His features were English; his skin was tawny. Whence he came none knew or wondered. In the workshops and road-gangs were many black men brought down by contractors on jobs; and some, like himself, remained as puddlers and stokers, keeping themselves to themselves, and making a colony of a score or so. But with these he had no dealing, holding himself as an Englishman, and being happier in the coldness of the whites than in the acceptance of the blacks. He made way for his neighbours, deferred to the rest of Clutterfield, and

East of Mansion House

effaced himself in public places with nice regard for social distinctions. He had to; for even the most tolerant had made him see that there was a sharp boundary line across which a certain frigid intercourse only was permitted.

But years of patience, clean living and quiet behaviour had been rewarded. He was accepted. His neighbours now commiserated the dash of the tar-brush, and did their best to show by their attitude that they imputed no blame to him on that account. They even went out of their way, with elaborate tact, to remark in his presence—"Ey, after all, nobody caan't 'elp 'is parents. Can 'e? It's what 'e is that matters." They showed him, by word and bearing, that he was "all right." They drew him into their groups. Often they had stood him drinks in the casual manner of high favouring low; but now they permitted him to stand drinks to them, and by this concession his social "all-rightness" was assured. By this grace his mother was forgiven.

Dow

They ceased to speak of the Darkey, the Dago, the Nig, and spoke of him, friendly-wise, as Little Dow or Old Dow or Young Dow.

"Ey, 'ere 'e is. How'st find things, Dow? What'll 'ave t'drink?"

"Very kind of you, Mister Affleck"—a thin voice from the back of the nose—"but won't you and yoer friend haff a drink with me?"

"Ey, don't mind. Business good, eh? Fine. Well, well. Here, listen. Ah, just 'eard a story. Rare good 'un. You'll laugh at this, young Dow. Listen."

He kept shop in the street that runs from the Square of Clutterfield to the road that goes by chimneys and pit-heads to Stew-pony. It was a general provision shop, and he did good business. He was civil in demeanour always, and on wet days cheerful. He gave the children good measure of their sweets, and threw in jocular talk. He gave the mothers ready attention to their smallest purchases. Mr. Marshall Field and the authors of books on salesmanship had noth-

East of Mansion House

ing to teach him. He proved himself a good citizen, a straight business man, and a good fellow with a dash of sportsman.

Outwardly, he showed no recognition of the change of Clutterfield's feeling towards him. He preserved his unassuming manner. He never spoke out of his turn. He remained the same modest fellow as before, apparently unconscious of the years of purgatory he had left behind.

Now among the most regular of his customers was young Mary Christmas. Mary Christmas was bold and easy, with a bit of a tongue, and she had been one of the first to address him on the level, as one human to another; and if the appreciation in his heart did not reveal itself on his face, he knew that she understood what it meant to him. It was she who had urged her father to make some show of treating him decently in public places; and from this the reaction in feeling towards him began. It went further. When Dow wanted a small loan to enable him to extend his business to newspapers and tobacco, Mr. Christmas and a

Dow

crony of his were able to arrange it. And when the loan was repaid well within the fixed date, Mr. Christmas slapped him on the back, and said he was a damgood feller; a White Man.

It was just this little extra dose of appreciation—like the one more little drink—that intoxicated Matthew Mark Mohammed Dow. It sent him up in the air, and fresh air is somewhat strong for those who breathe in alleys. He had become by now accustomed to being well-regarded, but this White-Man touch inflated him, and he went soaring. He felt that he was now one of them: they had said so. He began to be assertive. The mixed strains in him—East pulling West—had given him only a half-understanding of the Englishman. He conceived that money was their rock-bottom standard in all matters, and when he found that they not only recognized him as an equal, but were willing to lend him money, he thought they would be equally willing to give him any smaller thing that he cared to ask for.

East of Mansion House

So he went one evening to Mr. Christmas and asked him for his daughter.

Anxious to do the thing properly, he stood for an hour before the glass in his bedroom, shaving and dressing. He put on his blue serge suit. He put on his mauve socks. He put on his patent leather boots. He put on his wing-collar and regimental tie. He put on his grey gloves and his velour hat. Then he took his malacca cane, and prepared to do as all well-bred Englishmen do when contemplating marriage. He set out to See Her Father.

For long he had looked upon her, and found her beautiful; and had thought how pleasant life would be as a married man with a pretty wife. He would then be fully arrived; a complete Englishman, as good as anybody else. With his mother's feeling for the nice usages of the occasion, he went to Ben Christmas. Christmas received him affably, and, seeing the occasion as a neighbourly call, brought out the whisky and glasses. They chatted idly. Christmas told a story and Dow laughed at respectful

Dow

length, and then told one of his own; and when Christmas rose to refill he slid easily to the subject of Mary, and said that he would like to marry her.

It was amazing how Ben took it. You'd have thought that Dow had landed him a straight left between the eyes instead of a few graceful words of ceremony. He fluffed and flummoxed for some moments before he could meet the assault without unnecessarily wounding the assailant. For some time he fumbled with "Wells" and "Buts" and "Ey, dears" and "Whys," and "I-mean-to-says." Then, at sight of Dow's face, he calmed a little, and began to understand the proposal.

"Siddown, lad, siddown. Ey, this is a bit of a surprise, y'know. I never dreamt . . ."

Dow smiled amiably. "Fathers never do."

"No, but really, Dow. It's—it's difficult. Difficult. Ey. . . . Ya see that, don't ya?"

"How?"

"Why—not quite the usual thing—eh?"

East of Mansion House

"I don't know. I thought . . ."

"But, surely. . . . D'ya really mean . . . Don't ya see . . . I couldn't . . . I wouldn't be . . ." He left his sentence with a loose end for Dow to catch. Dow missed it.

"Why not? I do good business now. Every week I do more."

"Tch! Tch! It's not that, lad. Tidden that. Put yaself in my place, an' think it over. There's other things."

"What other things?"

Ben sat back and blew a long breath, and stared at his guest. He opened his mouth to speak; closed it; twisted his thumbs. Then, having formed his sentences, he began to speak. "Reely, lad, ya do surprise me. Ey. . . . I thought y'ad more understandin', like. More—sense an' that. Meantersay, it's—it's—it's not right. Why, y'are not the same—er—ya don't go to same church. Ma gel's chapel. Couldn't be done, lad. No ways."

"But many people of different religions marry. I am Englishman now all the time.

Dow

I talk like you. I do like you. I will leave the Salvation chapel and join Mary's. You see, I love her."

"Ey, yes. Yes, yes. But, ya see, y'are only English—in a way, like. See? Know what I mean?"

"So, but many English girls marry foreigners."

"Eh?"

"Many girls marry foreigners."

Ben threw up his hands and tch'd. "Yes—but . . . furriners—yes. But there's all sorts o' furriners. An'—an' . . ." Then he blew up. "Oh, ya dom fool, 'appen I'll 'ave to spit it out, after all." He blew again. "Listen, lad. We like ya round these parts. We know ya. Ya right up t'mark. But I didn't think ya'd go so far as this. No. It couldn't be done."

"But, Mister Christmas, why . . ."

Then Ben spat it out: "Eh, dommit, lad, why? *Why?* 'Ave ya forgotten that y'are *black?* Expect me to let ma gel marry a *nigger!*"

At that word Dow shot back in his chair,

East of Mansion House

and for half a minute sat staring at the lips that had uttered it. It was as though a block of ice had crashed on the table between them. He sat dumb, rigid, expressionless. The blow had gone further than his blow at Ben. It had gone between the eyes and beyond. Ben sat uneasily through those thirty seconds. He had had to say it, but he didn't like the way Dow had taken it. He wished he would do something—swear or kick. At last Dow shifted in his chair, and bowed head on hands over the table, and sat so for another minute. Something burned inside him. Through his head ran a whirl of ideas.

Nigger. The word that had burned so deep in his heart during those years of probation that even ultimate acceptance had not salved the wound. All the respect and friendship of these people, then, was mere show, without foundation. They respected him—but at a distance; he must not come near them. The Nigger. In tastes, sympathies and conduct he was white; but these people saw him as still not one of

them—pitied him, patronized him, approved him as a good fellow and honest citizen, as they might approve an ex-convict working his way back to decency. But—only so far might he come back; there was still a thin boundary line which he might not cross. He was black. He was The Nigger. Very well then. . . . In that moment his heart turned to the colour of his skin and the smokes that darkened the windows of the alleys.

And then the something that burned within him flamed up and possessed him; and deep in his heart rose a long cry that he had heard before in dreams; the cry of the swamps.

He jerked his head from the table. He rose sharply from his chair. The face that he showed to Ben Christmas was not the face of Matthew Mark Mohammed Dow. It was like the surface of a black pool disturbed by alien stones. Across it ran a hundred angry ripples, brushing one another and meeting and mixing and producing yet other ripples. He sent his arms

East of Mansion House

above his head; his chair went whirling to the floor; and with a harsh cry, he turned and streaked from the room.

Ben heard the front door open and slam. Half-risen from his chair, he stared at the place where Dow had been. He opened his mouth to say "Well, I'm dommed!" But he didn't say it; for there came from the street a noise that brought him fully to his feet; a noise so foreign to the hard work-noise of Clutterfield that it filled him with a sense of evil. Three times he heard it — *Whoo-aaa! Whoo-aaa! Whoo-aaa!* And, though he knew nothing of jungles, the cry, as it shot into his brain, brought with it an image of a midnight jungle.

"Lord, what've I done?"

He ran to the street door. As he opened it, he saw, in the dusk, men and women and children pelting up the street. He heard cries of warning and alarm. "Stoppim! Stoppim! Outa the way—quick. 'E's mad!" Then a smash of glass and metal, and a scream, and following it the jungle howl. At the door of an ironmonger's shop

Dow

appeared what was once Matthew Mark Mohammed Dow. In his hand he held a steel axe, swinging it right and left. His head was crouched to the level of his shoulders, his legs bent. A cry went up: "'E's killed Drumgold. 'E's killed Drumgold!"

For a moment or so he stood alone, sobbing; watched from a distance by an awed but alert crowd. Then he swung the axe at the window of the next shop, and tore its stock from it. He tossed jars and boxes right and left. He looked round for the next things, saw the crowd; and flew at it. They scattered. One, as he ran, turned, fainted, and swung at Dow's waist. He missed. The axe came down upon him, and the howl floated across Clutterfield to the Heath, as sad and terrible as an organ in a hidden street at night. Over the body he made a slow dance.

Far down the Murgery Road shopkeepers were putting up shutters and closing doors. Those nearest thought only of safety, and went to their cellars. Among their glass and goods Dow spent himself. Bottles, thrown with mad arms, flew to long distances

East of Mansion House

and shattered themselves among the flying crowd.

But Ben Christmas did not run. He stood fumbling at his short beard, and saying, "Lord! Lord! 'E'll smash place right up. 'E's gone off 'is rocker. An' I started 'im on it. Ey, dear."

A constable came round the corner. Ben stopped him. "Leave 'im alone, mister. I'll see to 'im. I was the last 'e spoke to. Maybe if I can get to 'im 'e'll quieten, like."

"You best stop 'ere. Nothing'll stop un. We'll 'ave ta shoot."

He broke away from the constable, and ran towards Dow, who had now reached an open space. Behind him lay a trail of wounded men and glass and merchandise. He stood still, grey with sweat. His mouth was open. His eyes blazed. His collar and coloured tie fluttered in strips. The axe swung idly from his right hand. Ben approached him gently.

"Dow! Dow, lad. Fer God's sake. You dunno what ya doing."

The words struck him as insanely feeble

for the situation, but he could think of no others. He stood before Dow, arms outstretched, appealing. Dow made a standing jump at him. Ben leapt backward as the axe swerved across his shoulder, and ran. When Dow stopped he stopped. Policemen gathered in force at different points of the circle. An inspector appeared wearing a holster. Men came from their homes carrying rough weapons. One held a poker. One carried a kitchen chair as a shield. They hustled their womenfolk indoors, and the women came out again and peered and wondered.

There was a lull. Dow was panting. It seemed that the fury was working itself out. Ben again went towards him, holding out a hand. Dow shuffled and swung the axe. A cat scuttered across the street. He killed it in its run, and looked about him. The crowd looked back at him and murmured: each man telling his neighbour how he would deal with the occasion; with moralisings on them bloody blacks, and them dam-fool police.

East of Mansion House

Then all gossip and speculation was snapped short in a concerted gasp. "Oh, my God—look!"

Out of the crowd broke a tiny figure in blue, toddling towards Dow.

"Lord—it's Ben Christmas's boy." There was a spasm of movement; a crackle of comment, shouts of "Stoppim! Stoppim! Catch 'im!" Little squibs of protest and alarm, fumblings after one clear phrase, that should command the situation. But while this was doing, the child ran swift and straight towards the torn, wet figure of Dow, and clasped him round the legs. At this there was a general rush, and the police fought them. "Keep back, keep back, willya? Ya woan do no good. Keep back!"

Above this rose the sharp voice of Ben Christmas. He came forward with shaking hands, his manner expressing misery and bewilderment. "Doan interfere, none of ya. 'E knows my boy. 'E's fond of 'im. Maybe 'e'll bring 'im round. I'll take a chance. . . . I wish I 'adn't said that word."

As the child approached him Dow was

turned half-round, and from the movements of his limbs it seemed that the fury was reviving. He was crooning to himself. At the sound of the child's step he swung round and brought the axe up. This time there was a solid forward swing from the crowd, and the police fell back. Some women screamed. "Willya keep back? Ya'll on'y madden 'im."

They obeyed, holding themselves tense for a rush, standing with fixed eyes. The whole power of that body was surging towards the child, centring on him as a protective cloud; and it seemed that this prayer was potent. For, at the touch of the child's arms on his legs, Dow's face cleared, and his arm dropped. He stood limp. The child looked up at him, smiling candidly into the steaming face, and proud of being, with the black man, the centre of a crowd's regard.

Ben Christmas saw his chance, and again moved towards Dow.

"That's my boy, Dow, lad. You know my Dick. That's Mary's brother."

East of Mansion House

The words went clearly through the silence, and Dow looked up, and caught Ben's eye. His look seemed to say that he understood; and among the crowd flew happy messages—"The kid's done it. The kid's got 'im. We'll 'ave un in a minute. Ey, Ben knew what 'e was doing. The kid . . ."

And they said no more. They fell back moaning, and those in front covered their eyes, as the child unclasped his hands and skipped in front of Dow, crying: "Nigger! Nigger! Nigger!"

X—THE PURSE

X

THE PURSE

AS the Stewpony dawn came up like sour milk, forty factory syrens broke loose on the town with roars, whoops, wails, and screams; jets and gouts and flickers of noise; and at their summons Mrs. Dumball slid out of bed and stuck clothes on herself. She dabbed her face with a wet flannel, and dabbed her hair into a sort of "dressing." On her head she stuck a battered hat.

The woman from downstairs, half-dressed, brought her a cup of warm tea and a slice of bread and butter. She munched and sipped with nervous movements of the mouth, as one for whom time does not wait. She was then ready for work; and ten minutes after sliding out of bed she was in the Brundle road, which linked Stewpony with

East of Mansion House

the big town. She walked with sharp steps as far as the "Reindeer" tavern, to save a penny, and the keen morning air kept her sleeve at work on her nose. She had the sharp features of the hunted and the keen eye of the hunter; always on the look-out for a bit of luck.

At certain corners, at certain minutes, she passed or overtook others going to work. With these faces many years of daily encounter had made her familiar. She did not know their names, nor they hers; but if she missed one face from the morning procession, she would wonder, and seek causes. "Caught a cold, I dessay. Lot o' colds about just now. Never did look strong, neither." With some she would exchange a nod, and pass the time of day, in the comradeship of seven o'clock. They were a sort of brotherhood. They had their feet on the earth. They had work to go to. If she saw a familiar figure turning a corner ere she had reached it, she would know that she was late, and would plod more briskly.

The Purse

She lived her day in the basement of the dingy Commercial Hotel of Brundle, in a whirlwind of dirty dishes, through which she perceived, dimly, glimpses of other shining worlds where dirty dishes were not. It was a life of clatter and slop; a kaleidoscope of work that came back and back to be done and done again; greasy dishes, sticky plates, wet cups, ran round and round her unceasingly until closing-time. The glimpses of those other worlds, where the waitresses had magnificent encounters with boys on the Wide Walk and motor-rides with mining students, and theatres and chocolates, conveyed little more to her than the reports of Society doings in the newspapers. It was all so alien to her that she never even desired to discover its mysteries, or stopped to envy those who were free of it. She had her own ideas of luxury—already too remote for attainment: a hot-water bottle in bed; a fire every morning to dress by, a gossip and a glass of something hot in the "Blue Pigeon" every evening; riding all the way home on wet nights in-

East of Mansion House

stead of walking; the "pictures" twice a week, and hot suppers afterwards at the fish-bar. . . .

It was this dream-panorama that kept her eyes open for the bit of luck that never came. Some day she might achieve it. She might come into some money; you did hear of things like that. Or that husband of hers might come home, well set up in the world, and ask her to take him back. You never knew. . . .

So she washed greasy dishes and sticky dishes and wet cups, and quarrelled with the other washers-up, and was sprightly with the waitresses and facetious with Boots; and said the same things to each of them six days a week, each time with the air of saying something novel and profound. And they gave her the same laugh and the same repartee, which she received with the same chortle, while the dishes clattered and the speaking-tube whistled, and the lift rattled and orders buzzed about her ears.

Each evening at the same hour, she made

The Purse v.

the same remark, "Ey, I'll never git done to-day." But she always did, blundering somehow through her work as she blundered somehow through life. At half-past seven she would look round, and say: "Now, we 'aven't left anything, 'ave we?" And as nobody ever answered her question, she would go home from the wet heat of the kitchen to the dry heat of her back room where the chimneys poured their smokes of ebony and olive.



Her foot kicked the purse in the gutter as she stepped off the kerb by the Girdleford Station. She stopped, made a little sharp noise of surprise, picked it up, looked at it, felt it, and said: "Oh? Well, now. Ey, dear!" She looked up and down the street. Nobody about who could have dropped it. She stood bent in an attitude of uncertainty, fingering it; then turned into a side-street. Might as well have a look and see what's in it. Under a lamp she opened it. After a catch of the breath, her fingers went to

East of Mansion House

work, raking and counting. It was a man's leather purse. It had eight one-pound notes, a ten-shilling note, and six—no, seven shillings, and fourpence.

Here Mrs. Dumball made her first encounter with those eternal verities which we call ethics. It came upon her slowly. In the moment of discovery such a vast sum did not tempt her. Had it been fourpence . . . But with a fortune in her hand, her first thought was to get rid of it. What did one do? Take it to the police, didn't you, and they'd advertise it, and return it to the owner; and perhaps you'd get a reward. That was the idea.

She looked round. No policeman in sight; and the police station a mile the other way. Well, perhaps she could give it up to somebody to take to the station, or perhaps keep it till to-morrow, and hand it over when she went to work. That'd be better. You couldn't trust just anybody to give it up. She'd keep it till to-morrow.

She came to this decision while turning it over in her hand and fingering the notes;

The Purse

and suddenly, as though at the touch of some evil fairy, the brown purse changed from a purse into a year's silver nights. It lay in her hand, and from it went raying little streams of hot-water bottles, fires, suppers, and treats. What a lot of good one might do with so much money as that. Why . . .

There was Mrs. Worple's boy who was sick. A little bit of that—just a little bit—and he could have a week at the sea. Do him no end of good. Set him up for life, perhaps. There was that young couple on the second floor, who'd got a chance of work at Birmingham, and couldn't go because they couldn't scrape up the railway fare. There was Mrs. Grummant, who was expecting next month, and wasn't getting proper food. After all, a man who carried money like that, in a purse like that, was a man who'd got plenty. That was plain. Eight pounds to him was probably like tuppence to folk like ourselves.

She caught herself having a good look round. Not an ordinary look like the first

East of Mansion House

look, but a little shifty-like. People were hurrying along the pavement or chasing the trams; still no policeman in sight. She squeezed the purse and played with it. She took out the four coppers, and saw in them a tram-ride all the way home. That tram-ride seemed symbolical of a triumphant entry. Think what it'd be if she was to march in to that young couple, and say: "Look 'ere, dearie, I've 'ad a bit o' luck. 'Ere's yer fare to Birmingham, an' pay me back when yeh can." Or supposing she was to go in to Mrs. Worple, and say: "Look 'ere, my gel, that Johnny o' yours wants fresh air, an' 'e's goin' to 'ave it. 'Ere's thirty shillings."

That's what she'd say. What a moment. She could see Mrs. Worple's face, and see herself, the giver of alms, the harbinger of health, receiving pæans of gratitude, and waving them aside with: "Don't thank me, dearie. Just a bit o' luck I 'ad. I backed a nice double what the porter put me on, an' it come 'ome."

She would be magnificent in bounty.

The Purse.

They would rise up and call her 'blessed. She would be a figure of colour and adventure in their lives. And the evening would be crowned with a hot-water bottle in bed, and a drop of something short.

But then she was pulled up sharp. Whatever are you thinking about? That'd be stealing. It isn't yours. You know it isn't yours. Why, you'd be a thief. Take it to the police at once.

Her grip on the purse loosened. She didn't like the feel of it. Thief was written on the pavement before her. Thief was written on the dark sky, in the vague lettering of aeroplane smoke. She beat back the little warm figures of beneficence that crowded upon her. How could she have thought of it? A voice murmured: But they'd never find out. They couldn't. Nobody saw you. Another voice answered swiftly: Doesn't matter. You'd be a thief.

The argument went back and forth.

The chap it belonged to would never miss it. One o' those commercials, probably.

East of Mansion House

It'd do more good down home than in his pocket. He'd probably blow it in an evening among the Wide Walk girls.

Never mind. It doesn't belong to you. Give it up at once.

Ey; perhaps that was the right thing. Though when you thought of all the good you could do with it. . . . It wasn't as though you was going to do harm with it.

All the same, you're stealing. You're a hard-working woman, respected by your employers—worth every bit of your eighteen shillings a week. You're fifty-one, and you've never had anything against you yet. You pay your way every week, without a penny from Charity. And now you're going to steal. Oh, yes, you are.

But then, again—supposing she did give it up, how did she know that it would go where it belonged. There was all sorts among the police—some good and some bad. Suppose it got into the hands of one of the bad 'uns? Much better to make sure that some good's done with it.

The Purse

And her pulses answered her: Thief—thief—thief.

At the end of ten minutes she was still standing at the corner, fumbling, through smoky mental processes, for guidance; sometimes tempted to drop the thing into the gutter; sometimes wiping away all doubt and preparing to take a tram home; sometimes deciding to walk the mile to the police station.

Then, when her mind was laid waste by the opposing forces, there entered into it the chorus of a hymn that she had heard the Salvation Army* bawling last Sunday in the Stewpony Public Gardens—"Take it to the Lord in prayer!" Why that silly tune came to her just then she didn't know; but it went rolling round and round her ears—"Take it to the Lord in prayer!"

Well, perhaps it was sent as a Message. She would obey it. Comforted by a resolution of activity, she walked away, holding the purse under her coat. There was St. Barnabas's across the road, and a board out-

East of Mansion House

side told you that it was open day and evening for rest, meditation, and prayer. It was the old parish church, but she hadn't been inside it, or any church, these twenty years. Sunday, her one free day, she made a day of bodily rest.

She went in timidly, with the air of the intruder. But once inside that vault of dusk and peace, she became calm. The spirit of tranquillity possessed her. She walked about on hushed feet, looking at the stained windows and the monuments and the pillars. Something in the atmosphere seemed to purge and soothe and strengthen her. The trivialities of life slipped from her. Doubt seemed foolish. Hesitation between right and wrong seemed dirty. The high spaces endued her as with a benediction. Resting there was as blissful as bathing your feet in hot water.

She forgot wholly what had brought her there. It seemed that she was walking with God. She forgot the purse. She forgot the debate.

And when she came out, dreamily calm,

The Purse . . .

she went without thinking to the nearest bar and bought herself a double hot whisky and two sandwiches; and there she met Mrs. Adnitt, and they had so deep an argument on life that she left the purse on the bench where they sat.

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**XI—THE TABLETS OF THE
HOUSE OF LI**

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XI

THE TABLETS OF THE HOUSE OF LI

WHEN the sergeant of the dock police, years ago, stopped a mob of street-corner louts from tormenting a slightly intoxicated Chinese youth and robbing him of his family tablets, he didn't know that he was making a friend for life. He did not know that this man would save him in the hour of his deepest grief. He did not know that he was giving hostages to the secret powers that live in the highest air of the mountains of the unknown confines of Cathay. He only knew that, outside the little marine store at the corner of Gill Street and West India Dock Road, he kicked three boys and cuffed another half-dozen; and having done this he went on his way and forgot it.

East of Mansion House

But Li Foa did not forget. He was, for the sergeant's comfort, a little too persistent in memory. He would cross the road to thank Sergeant Pidding. He would run after Sergeant Pidding and turn in front of him and bow and smile. He would point out Sergeant Pidding to others, and recite his courage and nobility, until the sergeant damned him for a fool and a nuisance. Certainly he was a fool and looked a fool—the type that boys intuitively pick out for comment and horse-play. He went about asking for it. His downcast face; his long, loping stride from the knees, as though treading down jungle grass; his sidelong, self-effacing looks, and his habit of hugging the walls of the byways, expectant of assault, all gave news of a victim who would afford good entertainment.

His folly was most clearly shown in his attitude to the sergeant's casual interference. He had thanked the sergeant at the time, and to English ideas that was sufficient. By no standards need he have repaid this trivial service by total self-annihilation.

The Tablets of the House of Li

But he did, as I will show you. He borrowed a farthing and paid back a million.

He made himself debtor not only to the sergeant but to the sergeant's house, the sergeant's wife and the sergeant's child. He could not even pass the six-roomed cottage in King Street without a *kao-tao*; and neither the sergeant's wife nor his small daughter was safe from the embarrassment of smiles and preposterous presents, and promises of every courtesy and service named in the Book of Rites and the Book of the Mean. He bought unwholesome sweets for the child, and for Mrs. Pidding foolish flowers of which the remorseful hawker said that it was a shame to take the money. And when the sergeant, with mild irritation, cried: "For the Lord's sake, get outa the way and forget it, yeh silly pie-can!" he only smiled at the fashions b'long white man, and continued his pious observances.

Even when away on his boat he continued to burn prayer-papers for the sergeant and his house; and in the same hour that his

East of Mansion House

boat came up the river he would show himself in King Street with some trophy of travel for the child and fresh benedictions. So that at last he wore them out, and they had to accept his friendship and his interest; and came, after a year, to look for his visits and to return his interest in them by interest in him and his fortunes.

Four times a year he reappeared in Limehouse; and having made offerings to Mrs. Pidding and the child, Anne, he would carry the sergeant to Charley Brown's or the "Blue Posts" or the Commercial, like any dutiful son home from the sea.

They gathered from him the story of his insignificant family and saw how he cherished the family tablets, and how the memory of his mean ancestors was to him as sacred as the honour of the Cecils or the Percys. If, by some timely act, the sergeant had saved the honour of the house of Howard, he would have understood what he had done, and might have suffered some glow of conscious virtue. But his social surroundings did not allow him to see an

The Tablets of the House of Li

old English family and an obscure family of Cantonese workers from the same angle. The one was serious and august; the other was a rather pathetic joke. But there it was, brought into his own house, and he had to accept it and smile; and a year later he accepted it anew. But it was not funny then.

The family tablets of Li Foo were to him as his life itself, for in them dwelt the spirits of his fathers. They were his passport to the happy fields and palaces behind the moon, the reward that would surely be his for loving attention and duty towards the departed. Never were they out of his keeping, for he was the sole survivor of his line; and, knowing that the eyes of his fathers were upon him, looking to him to uphold the line, he was wandering the seas in the hope of gathering sufficient money whereby he might take a virtuous wife and thrust the house of Li into the honourable recognition of future ages. In the lodging in Oriental Street to which he came on each return to Limehouse, the tablets were suitably displayed beneath the joss,

East of Mansion House

and sweet observance was made to them. He would sit piously before them and seek from them inspiration and guidance, which in trivial matters was sometimes given and in serious matters never.

He had none of your Western education, and so had no friends among the enlightened sojourners from his own country. By some pleasing miracle the corrupting influence of those advertising agents, the missionaries, had never fallen upon him; and he knew nothing of the convenient casuistry of Western religion or of the grave beauty of Western civilization. His benighted mind had not yet overtaken the new ideas that Western business men were thrusting through his provinces. He knew nothing but the duty his father had taught him towards the Three Constant Virtues; and being, as I said, a fool, he was content to respect his father and adopt his ideas, untinged by progress, as sufficient to himself.

Oriental Street is a little backwater near the junction of King Street and Pennyfields—a backwater within that London back-

The Tablets of the House of Li

water where the coloured roamers of the sea have found a resting-place. They come; they settle for a space; they go on; and wherever they go they carry their country and build it about them with banners of silk and bitter music and their joss and their tablets and the light of spent suns.

Into the silence of Li Foo's room, steeped in the tart odour of punk-sticks, floated the noises of the streets. There was the call of the London milkman. There were murmurs of electric tramcars, the rattle of a lorry, the howl of a factory hooter, the challenge of a fish-hawker; and through these noises came, faintly but persistently, the nasal note of a pipe, the footsteps of shuffling figures and a voice from the Yellow Sea crying "Ow-ah-bah-yow!" The London noises he did not hear; in that lost alley he was at home and wanted nothing of the barbarism of the streets beyond.

One other spot alone in the foreign city had meaning for him—a little house in King Street which he could see from his tiny window. In that house lay a solemn

East of Mansion House

debt. To that house he must respond when called, for that house was virtually the keeper of his life; it had shown him the unrepayable service.

The time came when he must meet it, and he did not fail.

When the *Hildert* was berthed in West India Dock, and the fires damped, stokers and crew were free for the shore. Black men came down the gangway, some with lean faces and straight hair, some with round faces and curly hair. Brown men came, too, and white men; the white men in neat serge and natty collars, the brown men in blue dungaree. A few Chinese came in ready-made lounge suits and coloured ties and yellow shoes, alarmingly Western. The last to step ashore was Li Foo, in canvas suiting with a blue scarf at his throat. He carried two or three small parcels.

He came through the dock gates in the hour of a December afternoon when the violet of the air was fretted by the yellow of the lamps; and made a straight way to

The Tablets of the House of Li

King Street. He knocked at the door, his slow smile already making his face a moon; and the sergeant answered him. But there was no simultaneous wink and nod and grin to welcome him, and he did not enter. The sergeant's face was drawn, and it seemed that his eyes had not known sleep for some nights. He lifted a hand.

"Not to-night, ole son. No can. The kid—Anne . . ."

"How?"

"Ill. Very much ill." He was not looking at Li Foo, but beyond him and across the street. Anne to him was as the tablets to Li Foo. "Very much ill. Much pain. All time. You understand?"

Li Foo nodded. His English was limited, but he knew the simple words of daily life, of grief and joy and hunger and trouble and fortune. "Uh-huh. I rest three weeks. I come, yess, to-morrow?"

"Ah. Do. To-morrow. Doctor here now."

Li Foo went away sorely troubled by the trouble that had fallen upon his friend and

East of Mansion House

helper. He carried his packages to Oriental Street and engaged his room; and there he arranged his tablets and his joss, and sat before them and burned many prayer-papers and recited the story of the sergeant's intervention on behalf of the house of Li, and wrote it laboriously in fair written characters; and arose hopefully.

But his fathers were sleeping or engaged in business in distant fields, and next morning the news was worse. Urged by desire to do something, he bought chrysanthemums and fruit and guava jelly and water-lily flour at Lee Tack's store, and carried them to King Street; and they were accepted quietly, and sadly, as offerings that recalled happier times and for which there was now no occasion. He went back to his room, and called loudly upon his fathers to help one who had helped them. But there was no response. News came that Anne was worse . . . and again worse and weaker. And on the fourth day the sergeant came out and walked with him up and down the narrow street, and told him

The Tablets of the House of Li

that no skill could save her. It was finished. Another night and . . . There was no man of medicine in the great city who could perform the miracle.

Li Foo said nothing. He folded his hands and went away, and all that morning he sat in the Public Gardens where the live scent of English flowers protests against the dead perfume of Chinatown's spices. He sat in thought, and at last his slow mind began to work and faint light came into it. His friend was bowed and broken. There was agony in his face and in his voice, so that Li Foo desired deeply that miraculous power might be his to salve and heal it; and as he pondered and remembered that drawn face, there came to him one terrible idea.

This man had saved for him his most precious possession; could he stand still while the man's most precious possession was in danger, when he might . . . Might? He could. Of that he was sure. He had lived long in the hills, and he knew much and believed much that the more enlightened had

East of Mansion House

put aside. He knew that he could do this thing. It was put upon him to discharge his debt; this was the moment given to him to prove himself, even to the point of destruction. He had called upon his fathers whom he had so faithfully served, and they had not heard or would not hear. The debt must be paid, without thought of equity or cost. He must call again upon the powers.

Late that afternoon, a small figure, with head bowed to chest, slipped from Oriental Street into Pennyfields and across to King Street. The canvas coat was buttoned tight, and bulged, and the arms were laid across it as though holding a precious burden. The face held that dirty grey tinge that in the coloured man is the pallor of fear. A few figures were floating or shuffling about the street, and there was a sound of music from the "White Horse," and the usual evening noise of newsboys and homing workers. Nobody noticed the grey figure; nobody guessed what dreadful things were about to be done in King Street. In great cities spots of misery and terror are strictly localised;

The Tablets of the House of Li

and anyway the seven millions have their own affairs.

At the sergeant's house he knocked, and the sergeant, opening to him, made dumbly to wave him away. But he was insistent. "You lis-sen. I come in. I make well. Yess. Oh, yess! Can do. You let. I speak you I help you when you want. I come help now."

Whether the sergeant understood or not, one cannot say, but he held the door back and let him enter. In the parlour Li Foo, holding his arms close, repeated his story. "I make well. You let."

The sergeant blew a great breath of exhaustion and sat down. What was the fool talking about? Nothing was of any use now. The doctor had gone; there was but one thing to wait for. What was the fool babbling about?

"I go up. Yess. I make well."

The sergeant's mind was not working. It held but one idea, and that idea filled it and clogged it. He got up. "All right. You want to see her. No harm in that."

East of Mansion House

They went upstairs and went softly into the top room, from which came a soft moaning. The sergeant's wife was sitting on the bed, staring down at the pillow. Li Foo looked once at the bed; then round the room. Still clutching his coat, he spoke to the sergeant and nodded towards the bed.

"You speak her go 'way one time. Me alone. I make well."

"What?" The word was used as though the sergeant were not certain of its meaning.

"You go 'way one time. Me alone. I make well."

The sergeant looked about him as though asking for guidance or explanation. He put a hand on his wife's shoulder. "Just a minute, old girl. Downstairs a minute. I'll——"

"Downstairs? What for?"

"I don't know. He says—— He says . . . I don't know. But come downstairs."

"But what——"

"He wants to . . . it's no good. It doesn't matter. But he says he can . . . I don't know. Come downstairs a minute."

The Tablets of the House of Li

They did not know why they left that room with Li Foo and the child in it, but they did leave. They went downstairs. Li Foo softly closed the door and went to the bedside. The child was half-conscious and moaning. Her head was moving from side to side. Her arms were flung over the sheet. He bent over the bed, and with scissors cut one lock of hair from her head. Then he unbuttoned his coat and began his preparations.

Downstairs the sergeant and his wife waited. They did not know what they were waiting for. They did not know what they were doing. They did not know how long they had been waiting, or how long they had been conscious of certain noises before actually noting them. But suddenly Mrs. Pidding said: "What's that?" and then both knew that they had been listening for some time to something that was not a moan.

It was a series of noises that were not the noises of a London house. Alien noises, as though something—they could not tell what

East of Mansion House

—had got into the house. Each said: "What is it?" and sat with lifted face. But they did not move. The sergeant said: "There's something funny—something . . ." and his wife said: "Yes—something . . ." and then in the midst of her grief said: "D'you think he's—he's—I mean . . ."

"What?"

"Well . . . Oh, I know it doesn't matter! Couldn't be any worse. But—these coloured people. You never know. They're not like us. He might have turned against us."

"Sit down, old girl; sit down. No—they're not like us. That's why—do sit down, girl. You can't do nothing. He's all right. He had an idea he could do something. Course, it's no good. But I thought there's no harm in——"

"But you don't know. He might . . ."

He waved her away. "I don't know, girl, I don't know. I told you so. That's the truth. What's it matter, anyway? He can't do any harm, and he might——"

"Might what?"

The Tablets of the House of Li

"I don't *know*. But—listen!"

From upstairs came faint noises that had the sound of distant howls, and something like a low chant. There was a smell of burning, and it was not the smell of prayer-papers or punk sticks. There was a noise of things being moved about; and then silence. Complete silence; not even a moan. And after some seconds of silence, a series of little bangs, and then a sudden crash, followed by a long wail. Again silence, and then a soft padding overhead as of an animal moving round and round its cage.

"Whatever—— I mean, what's he up to? Oh, go up! Go up and——"

"No. Sit down. I don't know. I can't tell. He thinks he's helping us. Sit down."

"But you must see what he's up to. These coloured men—oh!"

From upstairs came a long howl—a howl that had no note of the animal or the human; a howl that filled every corner of the house.

"Ted—if you won't go up, I'll——"

"All right. I'll go and see."

East of Mansion House

He went slowly upstairs, and blankly, without conjecture of what he was going to see. As he reached the door he saw that his wife was behind him. He put out a hand to stay her. Little gurgling noises came from the other side of the door. Holding his wife aside, he opened the door, looked in, and drew sharply back. "Go away. Go away. Go down. For God's sake, go down!"

"What is it?"

"Go down. It's all right, but—go down." His tone compelled her to go down two steps, but she went no farther. He entered the room. As he did so, he stumbled over a little brass object, and stood still and said "Oh! Oh!" slowly. "Now what's been doing here? Now what . . ."

He looked round the room, and his wife, coming behind him, looked over his shoulder. She did not see the room; she looked straight at the bed, and suddenly, pushing her husband aside, went to it and stood still. Both stood still; and into their plain London minds came darkly a belief

The Tablets of the House of Li

in strange doings. They did not question; they did not examine; they accepted what they saw.

The washing-stand was draped with a white cloth covered with red devices. On it stood two lacquered ornaments of twisted shape and foul significance. About the floor, arranged in a pentacle, lay the broken fragments of the tablets of the house of Li. In a small brass tray something was smouldering; and before it, on his knees, crouched a figure that had been Li Foo. He crouched, gibbering, with hands folded about his breast; and, seeing him, they drew back from the unclean thing, and the sergeant cried:

"Fool Fool What've you done? Oh, what you done to yourself?"

And then his wife cried "Look!" and they went to the bed.

The child was lying with eyes open and a little smile. She said: "The pain's gone now. I'm hungry. 'N then I'd like to go to sleep."

They looked from her to the figure at the

East of Mansion House

washstand—no more the respectable Li Foo but a creature of the swamps. He turned towards them, and as he turned they again moved instinctively backward and stood there, while with smirched face and dripping lips he crawled out to hide his misery forever under the arches of the river. He had paid his debt; and the next day he was dead. He was found in great pain on one of the wharves, but as he had lain all night under a drenching storm there was nothing extraordinary in that or in his death.

XII—JOHNNY

XII

JOHNNY

OLD Mrs. Manvers was wheeled each morning in her chair from a street in Cyprus to her "pitch" near the Woolwich ferry; and there year by year she sat, moping and hating. She was gaunt and grizzled, and her face was soft. Her outer clothing, and those parts of the inner that were visible, were dulled with usage. She was muffled in two or three worn coats, a woollen scarf and woollen mittens. Her arms were long, and her hands, that for years had performed no heavy task, were large and shapeless. People first seeing her thought of November the Fifth, and then felt ashamed of themselves.

In this wooden chair she lived and ate and slept. Day by day she sat at her corner, collecting casual coins and small comforts

East of Mansion House

from the workers she knew, and sometimes making a sale from the tray of matches, collar-studs and bootlaces which she carried on the arm of her chair; and morning and evening her niece, Daisy, wheeled her out and home. Daisy was brisk, bright-coloured and strong, and Mrs. Manvers hated her. She hated her for being whole and strong, and so stressing her aunt's deformity and the deformity of her aunt's boy, who went on crutches. For the boy she had infinite pity and love; indeed, all things, human and animal, that were maimed or misshapen, won from her warm looks and sympathy. But health and grace, wherever she saw them, whether immediately about her, or in pictures, in men or children or horses, filled her with a longing to seize them and grind them beneath her feet.

What she couldn't do to them she could do to Daisy. Daisy was on the spot, at her hand. . Through Daisy she could make her protest to the world, and she did. Week by week she noted with appreciation the slow crushing of the spirit, the drooping of

Johnny

her gaiety, the abatement of her step. To cloud Daisy's beauty with distress and mortification was her challenge to things as they are, and as often as Daisy wilted under her words she knew satisfaction. At evenings she would sit propped in her chair in their two-roomed home, and encourage the boy, Johnny, and prompt him in tauntings, and chuckle at Daisy's discomfiture; and at any attempt on Daisy's part to retort, she would curse her and cuff her.

Under three years of this Daisy wilted in patience. There was nothing else that she could do. Her offenders were safe, beyond requital. They could go to any length and she could make no effective return; for they were cripples. That word quieted in her all anger and indignation. She could not use her fluent physical power against them. She could not lift her voice against them. They were helpless, dependent upon her for every small business of the day. She could not resist their whims. She could not bring herself to the cruelty of abandoning them. Too, she knew no other life and no

East of Mansion House

other people. She had here enough to eat and a place to sleep in, and the timid heart craves always the familiar scene and the known faces, though these faces be unkind. So she remained, pliant to their malice.

Often she looked at the old woman as she sat forlorn in her chair, fondling her son and crooning over him; and often she wished them dead. Of the hopes and desires and dreams that, thwarted, had turned the old woman's heart sour, Daisy was not of an age to guess. She saw her aunt and the boy only as her cruel captors; the weak triumphant over the strong; and the bonds by which they held her were their own deformities.

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That Monday evening she had got the old woman home, and had gone out to buy a few scraps for supper. In the street she met the Flanagan boy, and Johnny and the old woman waited and waited, tempers fuming and rising. Suddenly, Johnny, at the window, cried to his mother: "I can see 'er down there. With that Flanagan."

Johnny

And his mother said: "Ah—that's all she thinks of. Gadding about and flirting. We c'n starve f'r all she cares. There's 'er noo 'at she's just brought 'ome from the Club. When do we ever get anything new?"

Johnny had an idea. Bursting with it he leaned from the window and shouted to Daisy. "Day-zeel We want our supper. 'Fyou don' come up, I'll—I'll get yer noo 'at and smash it!" He turned to his mother. "Ah—that's moved her. I done it." He crowed. Flustered and petulant, Daisy came in. Without waiting to take off her coat she set about preparing the meal. But her heart was not in the job. It was adrift with the Flanagan boy. She was slow and clumsy.

Johnny sat on the step of his mother's chair. "How much longer? Don't hurry up, I'll—I'll—smash yer 'at."

The new hat, bought from subscriptions to the factory Club, hung on a peg behind the door. With a hop and a skip he got it. Daisy, at the fire-place, swung round. "Eh? Here—Johnny—you leave that alone. Johnny—you dare. *Johnny!*" Her face

East of Mansion House

went white. She saw her hard-won treasure, this piece of beauty wrought for the gladdening of the Flanagan boy, in brutal hands. "Now—Johnny—put it down. There's a good boy."

"I ain't a good boy!"

"No, but—Johnny . . ." She was approaching him with hands out. "Now—give it me."

He hopped away and waved it. "Git the supper, then."

"I'm getting the supper, ain't I? Now, Johnny. Put it down. Give it me."

"Supper first. Then you can 'ave it."

"Now, don't be silly." She stood before him, wheedling. "Johnny! Don't be nasty, now. You'll have your supper in a tick."

"I could smash it, yeh know. Wouldn't take me long, neither. Ain't much of it. Bin waiting nearly an hour, we 'ave."

Despairing of words, she made a grab at it. He put it behind him with "Yeah!" She stood over him, dodging round him; furious, impotent. He grinned. "Go on—'it me. I know yeh'd like to. 'It me!"

Johnny

Her aunt growled at her. "Leave the boy alone and git the supper. All this fuss!"

"But he's got my hat." She was near tears now. "Auntie—make him give me my hat."

"Leave 'im alone, d'y'ear? Tormenting the boy. You and yer 'at. All you think of is dressing up fer the boys, while we have to sit 'ere——"

"I know. But make him give me my hat . . . Come on, Johnny. I'll get yeh something hot. Something nice. I'll——"

Johnny stood swinging the hat, grinning. Then the grin faded and the mouth went vicious. "Urr—that's what you say now. Fat lot you cared when you was down there wi' Jimmy Flanagan. Nearly an hour. And me and mum nearly starving. Urr!"

A snap—and his fingers had the ribbon off. A rip—and the brim came away from the crown. At the first sound Daisy flew at him. In the shock of the moment she forgot his crippled state; forgot everything but the crowding afflictions of her situation

East of Mansion House

and the accumulated distresses of the day. They struggled. The hat went down and he stamped upon it with his one sound foot. Then, no longer Daisy, but a suffering organism, unconscious of what she was doing, she struck him in the face. The crutch slipped, and he went down. His head made a noise on the floor. He lay there howling.

For a moment the three of them were stupid with shock. It was as though a kitten had changed before their eyes into a grown tiger. The old woman snarled and tried to heave herself from the chair and fall upon the girl. Johnny picked himself up and crept to the bedroom. Daisy, blind with tears, stooped over the remnants of her treasure, gathered them up and hugged them. Then she became aware of her aunt's voice.

"Come 'ere, you—come 'ere!"

For the first time in her life she ignored the command. She was possessed. She drew back to the wall, and cried between sobs: "Shan't. You can't make me neither.

Johnny

Stood about enough o' you two. All these years. I'm fed up. All I done for you . . . And now . . . my hat . . . Feel sometimes I could go away and drown meself."

The old woman ground words at her through her teeth. "Urr—you beauty. You strike my boy, you—you—— Cripple-boy and all. You little bitch! Urr—if I could get at you." She strained her trunk from the chair. Daisy stood away, arms down, hands clenched, and gave hysterical defiance. "Smashing my hat . . . Don't care if I did hit him. Serve him right . . . I wish I was dead. Couple o' beasts—that's what you are. Both of yeh. You—you—you old hag." And grimacing and sobbing she ran upon the old woman and struck the big red face. For a moment her aunt said nothing, and the girl's fury died. "There! You made me. Oh, my God, you made me hit you."

The old woman spoke at last in a whine. "You beauty. You little devil. Striking two 'elpless cripples. You beauty. Come 'ere!" She snapped the last words, and

East of Mansion House

Daisy flew to the window, crying: "No—no. I'll throw meself out first." And stood there, hands over her face, sobbing with hate.

"Come 'ere at once."

"Shan't."

"All right, me lady. All right. You wait."

For a full minute there was no sound but Daisy's sobs and Johnny whimpering in the next room. Then, just as balance was returning to her, she heard a new noise, and dropped her hands and lifted her head. She screamed. The old woman's hands were on the wheels of the chair, and the chair was coming towards her.

The chair had almost penned her in the corner by the window when with a quick turn she dodged to the farther wall. The woman backed the chair, and came at her again. She made a dash for the door, but a sudden twist on the wheels brought the chair across it. Daisy thrust out her arms and turned again for the wall. Twice round the room they went, rumbling and

Johnny

gasping. The old woman swore in ejaculations. On the second round Daisy dodged towards the inner room, but there her way was barred. Johnny stood there with lifted crutch. As she fell back from him, the chair came near her. She turned, and as she turned Johnny hopped forward and pushed her. She fell against and across the chair. The old woman grabbed her. "Gotcher! Now! Now what yeh gotter say—eh?"

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All that night she lay awake, and her young mind wandered. Ideas and emotions that she had long repelled were now welcomed. The woman and boy passed from her consciousness as persons: they became symbols of all things mean and malignant; and the hat became a symbol of spiritual grace. Something in her had died during that struggle, and a new personality had arisen possessed by memory of beauty broken. Running away or self-destruction were no longer thought of. Hate now held her. She wanted to direct upon her aunt

East of Mansion House

the force of her hate; to compel her aunt's recognition of her as an enemy to be feared. She wanted her aunt to suffer as she had suffered. She wanted to shower blows upon that ragged head. She wanted to watch her die.

Next day the old woman was dead.

Sick at heart and sullen of face, Daisy was preparing her for the journey to her "pitch"—hating her behind tight lips—when, from the street, came a sudden chorus of voices that rose without pause to a roar. Both started.

"Dock-strikers," said the old woman. "They said there'd be a shindy to-day."

The noise grew swiftly—savage cries, commanding voices, contesting feet, the noise of the jungle animal—Mob. Daisy went to the window. "Oo-er. It's a riot. Police, too. On horseback. One of 'em's got a sword. They're going for the crowd. We can't go out yet." She stood wide-eyed at the window, and the old woman had to shout twice before Daisy heard her.

"What?"

Johnny

"I said: 'Where's Johnny?'"

"Johnny? I dunno. He went out some time ago."

"Out? Out where? Go'n fetch 'im in, then. Quick. Don't stand there like a gawk. Call 'im in."

"Go out there? I can't. The crowd's right against the door."

"Right against the door? And Johnny out there?" The old woman waved her arms to command, but Daisy's face was pressed to the window.

"Ool Listen!"

The roar of voices and the clatter of hoofs came to them in shudders. There was a crash of glass and a big scream. Daisy gave it an echo and clasped her hands. "Oh. Oh. They're riding 'em down. They're riding 'em down. Oh, my God! Oh—Auntie!"

"What is it? What's going on?"

"Oh, look—look!"

"What is it? Wheel me up!" She heaved in her chair. "Wheel me up."

Daisy did not hear. She pointed through the window, stammering: "Johnny! Johnny!"

East of Mansion House

"What about it? What is it?" She groaned and twisted herself. "Come 'ere and wheel me up."

"Johnny—he's out there. In the thick of it. Oh, the noise—like wild animals they are."

The old woman babbled, and fumbled with the wheels of her chair. "Go down to 'im, then. Go down to 'im. Or lemme go down. Wheel me down."

"I daren't. I couldn't. They're fighting each other now. Listen."

"Lemme go down. They won't 'urt me. Lemme get my boy. Oh . . . Daisy . . . Come an' get me down."

"No—no. You mustn't. You couldn't do anything. I'll call him." She lifted the window and called: "Johnny. Johnny." She turned to the room. "He's heard me. He's looking up. But he can't move. He's wedged in. The police are shoving 'em about."

The old woman gripped the chair-arms and struggled to use her limbs and made noises. "Lemme go down. Damn you—wheel me down!"

Johnny

"It ain't no use. You can't get out. They're right on the door. Police've got their truncheons out . . . Ool There's a man down. They're all on top of him. I can't see Johnny. Not now . . . Yes I can. They're all running. And the police after 'em. Ool There's a man picked Johnny up—running with him. Ool Oh-my-God—he's—he's down. Listen—they're mad. They're mad. He can't get up. The crowd's coming back. They got sticks and stones. They're just on Johnny now. The police are on 'em now."

"Lemme come to the window, then. Oh, Daisy, Daisy. Lemme see. Go down to 'em. Get my Johnny. Get my Johnny."

"It's no good. You can't. Better keep away. It's too awful."

With swift movements the old woman turned the spokes of the wheels and brought herself near to Daisy. But she was too low to see from the window. "Lift me up. Lift me up."

"No. There's things going on there . . . They won't hurt Johnny. He'll get through all right. You best not look."

East of Mansion House

"I must. I must. Oh, lift me up." She scrabbled with her fingers at the sill and drew herself up. From the jungle below came another scream. "I can't see him. I can't see him."

"He was there just now. Where that policeman is. There he is! Trying to run away. He's—oh, my God, he's down again. The horses are over him. They're going this way and that. Listen!"

"Oh, lemme go down. Oh, my legs. Lemme die with my Johnny. Daisy! I won't be harsh with yeh no more. There's something happened to him. I know there has." She was whimpering now and slipped back into the chair. Her head sagged. She stretched her arms to the window. "My boy!"

Daisy was repeating: "It's no good. You can't——" when she ran from the window to the bed crying: "Oh, my God."

The old woman moaned. "What did yeh see, Daisy? Oh, tell us what yeh saw."

Daisy got up, choking and white, and

Johnny

waved to the street. "Johnny. I saw him. I can't tell yeh what I saw. Under the horses. You can't see him, though. Don't try to. Don't look. It's too awful. When they moved away, I saw him, and——"

The old woman shot upward in the chair. Her eyes stared. Her mouth made noises. Daisy, clasping herself, drew away and looked again through the window, and swung back from it and stood over her aunt. With flying hands she pointed her words. "They've just cleared. And I saw him. Only I didn't reely see him. Where he'd been standing there was only—only—Oh!" She flew to the bed and covered her face in the pillow and tried to shut from her ears the noise of the strikers and their enemies, and the gurgling of her aunt.

They stayed so for some minutes; then, following a sharp break in her aunt's voice, she was sensible of a curious stillness in the room. She got up and went to the chair. The head had fallen to one side. The eyes were fixed. She put a hand to her aunt's breast.

East of Mansion House

Then she looked up and breathed heavily and stretched her arms, and turned idly to the window.

Two minutes later there was peace. The battle shifted to the main road, and its noise came in faint splashes to the room. A minute later and through the silence came a stumble and a hop and a clatter of crutch on the floor.

"'Ullo, Daise. Cuhl! Ain't half bin a rumpus outside. I see it all. I was at Flanagan's and they took me upstairs to a window. I see it all."

"I know. I saw you there. The row's upset your mother. I think it's done for her. You better go and find a doctor somewhere."

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